Character Connections: A Multigenre Approach to Studying Shakespeare

by Jessica Singer Early

A number of years ago, I came across Tom Romano’s two books, Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres (Heinemann, 1995), and Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers (Heinemann, 2000), and was immediately drawn to his multigenre approach to writing. According to Romano,

“A multigenre paper arises from research, experience, and imagination. It is not an uninterrupted, expository monologue nor a seamless narrative nor a collection of poems. A multigenre paper is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images and content” (x-xi).

Using Romano’s suggestions, I created a multigenre character study project for my high school seniors as a way for them to engage closely in the study of Hamlet. We spend roughly two weeks on this during the last half of a four- to five-week Hamlet unit. As a culminating activity, I asked them to gather all of the pieces of this character study to present as a final portfolio. (See portfolio requirements on page 11.) I wanted to see what would happen if students traced their character’s experience through a series of writing prompts, reflections, and text pairings. I wanted students to have a choice in their studies and a chance to step inside their characters’ shoes.

Choosing a Character
(1–2 class periods)

We began our study of Hamlet by reading, acting out, and viewing scenes from Acts I and II (for lesson ideas, see Shakespeare Set Free: Teaching Hamlet and Henry IV Part 1, from the Folger Library series, edited by Peggy O’Brien).

Before moving on to Act III, I asked students to select a character for the multigenre character study. Of course, not every character represented in the play appears in these first two acts, but students had enough exposure to the plot elements and the main characters’ motivations to get a sense of who they wanted to spend time studying as the play progressed.

To help students connect with the characters and think about their choices, I asked questions such as,

What character do you most like or admire, and why?
What character do you most dislike, and why?
What character can you relate to the most, and why?
(Or if you feel you can’t relate to any, explain why.)
Who surprises you? Who intrigues you?
Is there a character you can imagine being?
Is there a character who has said or done something that reminds you of someone you know?
Is there a character who makes you curious or suspicious about her/his motivations?

Responding to questions like this and using classroom conversation to highlight students’ impressions of the characters can be especially helpful for students who are having trouble understanding or engaging with the text.

Students’ Reflections

Next I asked students to write a brief reflection explaining their character choice. This was both a chance for them to think through their responses to the characters and a way for me to get a sense of their understanding at this point.

• Lauren chose to study Ophelia. “I was drawn to Ophelia because of her intense emotional range. Her psychological state and her passiveness caught my attention.”

• Abigail selected Ophelia: “She was one of the only significant women in the play, so I knew I could relate to her feelings. I also thought she had to be important if she was dating Prince Hamlet. She must have been quite a girl to nab him!”

• Sam chose Gertrude because he thought it would be interesting to study the play from a woman’s point of view.
• Shauna said, “I connected to what Hamlet felt because a good friend of mine, Karl, was recently killed in a car accident. I felt like I could understand Hamlet’s uncontrollable grief.”

• Matt chose Horatio because he wanted to know why Horatio remained so loyal to Hamlet and wanted to understand how friendship was being presented in the play.

Students had various reasons for selecting characters, and allowing them the opportunity to choose the focus for their study helped engage them as we moved forward. Students began to bond with their characters right away. When we worked through certain scenes, students asked to act out their own character’s lines, and when we discussed passages that were particularly challenging, students with characters involved in the scene were often the first to volunteer their ideas.

Pairing Images with Text Passages (4–6 class periods)

One of the things I like most about the multigenre project is that it allows me to open the study of Shakespeare to include diverse kinds of texts to help students make sense of the play. The texts I chose for this step were visuals from various sources that students were asked to pair with text passages.

Selecting Quotes

Next I asked students to pull out 10 to 12 significant quotes spoken by their characters. These lines could be ones they felt were of particular interest or that helped to capture their character’s personality, predicament, or motivations. They spent time on this during two or three class periods and as homework.

As students completed this process, I asked for some volunteers to share a few favorites, and used class discussion to make sure students had a sense for the meaning of their lines. If any students were struggling with finding lines or with understanding the text, this was a chance to question or talk through lines or passages together for clarification.

This assignment required students to be on alert as we continued to read, view, and act out the play; it required close reading as they followed their character’s growth across five acts, and it allowed them to read the text with a specific lens. For example, one student who had chosen Ophelia chose various lines she felt were central to Ophelia’s struggle and sadness, such as Ophelia’s line, “No, my good lord, but as you did command I did repel his letters and denied his access to me” (II, i, 106–8), and the line, “Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than honesty” (III, i, 109–10).

Asking students to mine the text for significant lines was an important step in developing their understanding of the characters, however, I wanted students to go still further and to connect the meaning of the quotes to their character’s development. This is where the visual images came in.

Selecting Images

At this point I asked students to find or create visual images to represent each of their character’s passages. I distributed the following instructions:

Student Instructions: Linking Character Quotes with Visual Images

Once you have 10–12 quotes selected, search your life for artwork to illustrate the meaning behind your selected passages.

I know that some of you love drawing, painting, and photography, so feel free to use your own artwork whenever possible. You may also use images from magazines, newspapers, catalogs, approved online sources, or other sources.

These images will become a powerful writing prompt and a tool for revisiting the text.

I provided charcoal pencils, watercolors, pastels, paper. At first students were surprised by this task. One student reacted quickly, “You want me to do what? I’m not artistic!” If students did not feel comfortable creating their own artwork, I brainstormed with them about other sources for images.

I also asked them to write a brief explanation explicitly linking the text passages with the images. Students were to think about what they knew of the character’s personality and motivations from their reading, so that the pairings and the writings would be opportunities for deeper insights about the characters. Again, students spent time on this during two or three class periods and out of class.

Student Examples

• Abigail chose a postcard she had found at a thrift shop with an image of two blue, vacant, staring eyes to illustrate Ophelia’s quote: “The glass of fashion and the mold of form, Th’ observed of all observers, quiet, quiet down” (Act III, i 147–8). She wrote, “This quote leads me to believe that Ophelia has to be very put together all the time. It seems she is always being watched and so she has to mirror proper behavior and be attractive. She talks about being observed, this is why I chose the photograph with two giant eyes that appear to be watching everything.”

• Sam said that even though the play itself was a challenge for him to understand, pairing images with his character quotes was one of his favorite parts of the project.

• Rachel loved the opportunity to use her artistic skills, and
Multigenre Character Study
Portfolio Requirements

As we watch, read, perform, and discuss Hamlet, you will be asked to focus on a character in the play. Choose a character that you are drawn to for some reason. You may choose a character that infuriates, confuses, impresses, or intrigues you.

As we study the play, you’ll be asked to find phrases or scenes (at least 10) that focus on your chosen character. Find lines that describe the character particularly well, foreshadow events to come, or remind you of a personal experience or another creative work.

You’ll also be asked to find visuals that help illustrate your chosen quotations/scenes, and to explain these connections.

Another component of this project will be identifying two pieces of writing that help explain your character.

Finally, you’ll write a letter of reflection about the project.

By the end of this project, you will need to have completed and collected the following items to turn in:

- 10 to 12 quotes from Hamlet that focus on your character.
- 1 image, found or created, to illustrate EACH of your selected quotes.
- An explanation linking your selected quotes and visual images.
- 2 pieces of writing that matter to you and help explain your character. These can be poems or songs (1 of each, or 2 songs, or 2 poems). You may either find these through sources suggested in class, or write one or both yourself in the voice of your character.
- A letter that explains your thinking about this character and your final reflections on the project. Use questions such as the following to guide your writing:
  
  What surprised you about your learning or thinking in this unit?

  In what ways is the writing or work you did in this unit relevant to where you are in your life?

  What piece in your final project are you most proud of and why?

  Include some parting words to your character: What would you say to this character if he or she was standing in front of you? What will you hold onto from this character’s story?

Download this handout from the January 2010 Classroom Notes Plus web page at http://www.ncte.org/journals/cnp/issues/v27-3
created a charcoal drawing (see figure 1) to represent the sadness and despair in Ophelia’s line “I could feel his soul looking at my dirty hands that have caused aching eyes and words of hate” (III, i, 148).

Using Poetry and Lyrics as Points of Connection (2–3 class periods)

The next task for this portfolio required students to either find or write two poems or two songs, or one of each, as a way of further explaining their characters’ situations.

I gave students suggestions for places to look online for poems and song lyrics, including the following:

www.poetry365.com
www.americanpoems.com

Students found a wealth of potential poems and songs online and were soon engrossed in reading and comparing the new texts to passages in the play, to confirm ideas they shared in common. Some students highlighted and annotated words and phrases on copies of their texts to indicate connections and parallels.

Students were also surprised by the number of songs and poems they found that included explicit references to Hamlet and other works by Shakespeare. This led to a valuable discussion about the lasting impact of Shakespeare’s work and the fact that many modern songs and writings, as well as other artifacts of popular culture, include allusions and tributes to much older works of art and literature.

A number of students decided to write their own poems or songs for this part of the project; this too involved checking back with the text for inspiration and ideas for evoking the character.

As students located and/or drafted their poems and songs, they were allowed to brainstorm and share ideas in pairs or small groups. When students were ready, we reassembled as a class to read aloud (and in some cases, hear a recording) of some of the songs and poems students had found and created.

Using and creating additional texts allowed students to see their character’s experience represented through other genres, and helped to broaden students’ perspective.

One student said, “This unit was the first time I’d really gone out ‘in the world’ in search for connections to a text. At times, it was hard work, but searching for that missing piece or connection to my character was a fun challenge."

Examples of Student Connections

- Valerie chose poems that were connected to her character indirectly such as C. K. Williams’s haunting poem, “This Happened,” about a young girl who commits suicide by jumping out a window. She chose this piece because it provided insight into the kind of hopelessness Ophelia felt before drowning in the river.

- Abigail found a song by Fiona Apple, “Sullen Girl,” to connect with Ophelia. She reflected, “I went straight to Fiona Apple because she reminds me of Ophelia. They both had tough lives and have a sense of melancholy about them. This song is about being hurt by others and Ophelia is no stranger to this. A line in this song, ‘He washed me to shore and left an empty shell of me,’ reminds me of what Hamlet and Polonius did to Ophelia.”

- Shawn had recently experienced the death of his grandfather and he wrote a poem in his own voice for his grandfather as a way of explaining and understanding Hamlet’s grief over the loss of his father.

- Amanda wrote an advice poem for Ophelia in order to express all of things she wished Ophelia could have done to stand up for herself.

Final Reflection Letter (1–2 class periods)

The last piece of the multigenre portfolio consisted of a reflection letter in which students could express what they learned about their character and the play through the creation of their multigenre portfolio.
I gave students the following series of questions to use as a guide for this final written response:

**Questions for Final Reflection Letter**

Please respond to the following questions:

- What surprised you about your learning or thinking in this unit?
- In what ways is the writing or work you did in this unit relevant to where you are in your life?
- What piece in your final project are you most proud of and why?
- Include some parting words to your character. What would you say to this character if he or she was standing in front of you? What will you hold onto from this character’s story?

The final reflection letters allowed students to reflect on the process of creating the multigenre project, but more importantly, it gave them the opportunity to step back from the play and from their characters to make sense of what they had learned.

After reading through the letters, I found two main themes emerged in student’s reactions. First, students felt an overwhelming connection to their characters at the end of the unit. Secondly, the reflection letters revealed how students found the project useful in allowing them to feel more comfortable with Shakespeare’s language. Even one of my most skeptical students had something good to say about the project: “I am not going to lie to you and tell you that from here on out I’ll be running out to get Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets. But this was the first time I felt like I could grasp a Shakespearean play, and I liked how we had different ways of exploring the text.”

**Consolidating the Portfolio (1–2 class periods)**

As we finished reading, acting out, and discussing *Hamlet*, I gave students one to two days to pull together all of the pieces of their final character study to consolidate as a portfolio. Many students went to great lengths to create compelling covers for their portfolios and to show off their work.

On the day the portfolio was due, I asked students to set out their portfolios at different stations around the classroom. Then, students and I rotated around the room and skimmed the writings. I made available pads of multicolored sticky notes so students could attach comments, questions, emoticons, or other (classroom-appropriate) notes to the portfolios if they wished.

With ten minutes left in the class period, I asked students to gather their own portfolios back up and spend a few minutes skimming the notes and sharing their overall sense of the portfolios and the unit with the rest of the class.

It was thrilling to see students dive into one another’s collections, and a fitting end to our unit.

Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith explain that students benefit when they have opportunities to “build bridges from the literacies they have to the literacies they need” (see their chapter in *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice* [Heineman, 2007], p. 242). The multigenre character study allowed students to become full participants in our study of *Hamlet* and gave them various ways to learn about and to embrace multi-dimensional literary characters from the canonical text.

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**How to Teach Annotation in the Shakespeare Classroom**

by Mary Ellen Dakin

This excerpt is reprinted from Chapter 7 of *Reading Shakespeare with Young Adults* (NCTE, 2009), in which Mary Ellen Dakin presents a rationale and methods for using annotation to nurture active readers. Dakin says, “Some readers, from novice to expert, will argue that annotating literary text minimizes the aesthetic experience of imaginative literature, but experience has taught me that when students can add their marks to the page, they make the words ‘live twice’” (Sonnet 17).

In this section, I move between two *English Journal* articles written about annotating text by Carol Porter-O’Donnell and Matthew D. Brown because the methods I use to teach students how to write between the lines of Shakespeare’s text form a sort of hybrid. Years before I read either article, I was haphazardly teaching annotation skills, especially as we read from Shakespeare, but the recent influence of Porter-O’Donnell and Brown on my practice is significant. Still, neither author specifically addresses the act of annotating Shakespeare, and the sheer complexity of his text requires its own approach. There is so much going on in a single page of Shakespeare’s text that the most I can ask of my adolescent readers is to use the annotation bookmark like a menu, choosing from it to mark what stands out as they read and reread a sentence, a speech, a page, or a scene.

Before we begin teaching students to annotate Shakespeare, it’s helpful to ask students what they do when they can write on the pages. I make an overhead transparency