

Decision Education Foundation English Curriculum

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

by William Shakespeare

Unit Snapshot

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| <i>Designed For</i> | High School Students |
| <i>Essential Questions</i> | How do we know when a person is telling the truth? How is what I want related to what I do? What role do reason and passion play in decision making? Do all good decisions feel right? |
| <i>Content and Skill Focus</i> | Decision Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• head and heart influence commitment to action• all decisions involve risk• values and information help define action• good decision balance reason and passion• decision trees help clarify complicated text and decisions English Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• differences between a summary and paraphrase• soliloquy's reveal honest thoughts and feelings• attention to lines and sentences when reading Shakespeare |
| <i>Expected Outcomes</i> | Knowledge of how head, heart, information, and values influence choices Ability recognize a character's thought process in a soliloquy and create a basic decision tree Understanding how Hamlet's soliloquies reveal his decision-making process Improved speaking and writing skills |
| <i>Kinds of Assessment</i> | Shakespeare in Action (students direct the performance of a soliloquy) Essay on Hamlet's decision whether to kill Claudius Decision tree exercises Paraphrase assignments |
| <i>Time Required</i> | Seven class periods |
| <i>Comments</i> | Intended to supplement an existing plan of study for <i>Hamlet</i> , this unit focuses attention on Hamlet's five soliloquies. Lessons challenge students to explore values, information, reasoning, and follow through, as they analyze Hamlet's thoughts, feelings, and actions. |

(Version 7)

Overview

General Description: *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is the text for this unit, and the decision-skill lessons focus on Hamlet's five soliloquies. As students explore values, information, reasoning, follow through, and the role of head and heart in decision making, they will also be challenged to read the text closely, to practice paraphrasing and public speaking, and to analyze (in writing and discussion) Hamlet's thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Duration: Because this plan's main focus is on the soliloquies, the lessons are intended to supplement an existing Hamlet unit. The learning plan provides directions for when to incorporate the five parts of this unit. However, the actual amount of time needed will depend on how teachers decide to assign the various exercises. While this unit describes seven class periods, it is assumed that teachers will add assignments and lessons as needed.

Summary and Decision Perspective: *Hamlet* is about a young prince's struggle to decide if, when, and how to avenge his father's death. A ghost in the likeness of Hamlet's father appears in the first act with information about a murder and a request for revenge: the spirit tells Hamlet that his uncle, Claudius, poisoned him while he was sleeping in the garden. The rest of the play follows how Hamlet wrestles with this challenging decision.

In this unit, students will explore Hamlet's five soliloquies. These passages, which reveal the character's thoughts as he speaks to himself on stage, help us understand the way Hamlet thinks and feels as he faces the conflict with Claudius.

First Soliloquy. After reading Act I, students will evaluate Horatio's decision to "acquaint" Hamlet with the spirit he and the guards have seen. As part of this evaluation, students will take a close look at Hamlet's first soliloquy to assess his state of mind at the beginning of the play before he learns about his father's murder.

Second Soliloquy. Students will explore the role of reason (head) and passion (heart) as they study Hamlet's reflections on how the player's performance of the death of Priam relates to his own dilemma.

Third Soliloquy. "To be or not to be" begins Hamlet's most celebrated and challenging soliloquy. The class will examine how a decision tree can help us understand a difficult text and complicated situation.

Fourth Soliloquy. Hamlet finds himself with an opportunity to avenge his father's death. Students will explore the Prince's decision to delay his mission.

Fifth Soliloquy. Here Hamlet compares himself to Fortinbras, the young Norwegian prince who is leading an army on its way to fight the Poles. In this passage students will see how Hamlet uses basic concepts of decision making as he analyzes his own inaction.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

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1. Learning Plan

ONCE STUDENTS HAVE FINISHED READING ACT 1

First Class: Hamlet's State of Mind

Materials

Performance Task—Shakespeare in Action
Handout 1—Horatio's Decision Tree

Procedures

- Warm-up activity. Arrange students in pairs and tell them they will play “Five Minutes of My Life Today: Here's What Happened, No Kidding.” They begin by telling each other a few things they did this morning, and one example should be a lie. Try to guess what is not true.
- The ask the following questions:

**How do we know when someone is telling the truth?
Has the ghost told Hamlet the truth?**

After noting and discussing student responses, write SOLILOQUY on the board and ask students to define the word.

Points to Emphasize:

- a)** Whenever we have a conversation with others, there is always a bit “acting” going on (for example: point out that most people in the room are “acting” like model students—even though they may be thinking/feeling otherwise, i.e. want class to end, wish it was game time, eager to meet friends after class. Point out that you as teacher are also acting the role of ideal teacher and may be hiding true feelings or thought from the class: i.e. you could be craving a cup of coffee, worried about the long meeting you have after school, wondering why student x isn't engaged in the discussion). This fact is also true in plays: when a character speaks to another, she may be shaping or filtering the truth. Ask students to give examples.
 - b)** Because it is a speech spoken by a character only to him/herself, a SOLILOQUY is the one time in a play when we know that we are hearing the character's true thoughts, feelings, and motives. At this point, introduce the **Performance Task** and explain to students that they should consider, as they study each soliloquy, what it would take to perform each one and which one interests them the most.
- Have the class turn to Hamlet's first soliloquy (1.2.129-159), and ask someone to read it aloud. If needed, remind students about the following basic procedures for reading Shakespeare (verse) accurately:
 - a. While Shakespeare's plays are written in verses, combinations of lines make up sentences. To comprehend a passage, we must read sentence by sentence (as well as

line by line). Knowledge of grammar and punctuation helps here: locate verbs and subjects and pay attention to semi-colons, colons, and end marks (periods, question marks)—they help us hear the rhythm of the lines and make sense of the sentences.

b. To understand any story we need to know who is speaking. The same idea is true for reading a play. We must always remind ourselves who is speaking and notice when the speaker changes. A useful practice to keep characters straight is to imagine different voices for each one as we read.

c. Because Shakespeare uses some words no longer in our everyday vocabulary, pay attention to the notes in your text to define unfamiliar words and phrases. Reading Shakespeare well takes time: start slowly and notice the increase in your reading speed as you become more familiar with Shakespeare’s vocabulary, syntax, and rhythm. Listening to a recorded version of the text (if possible) as you read homework assignments can help with comprehension.

- After reminding students about the difference between a summary and a paraphrase, ask them to paraphrase the soliloquy. Procedural note: Students can complete this exercise individually or groups can be responsible for different sections of the passage (lines 129-137; 137-142; 142-153; 153-159).
Review the paraphrases to check that students understand the meaning (Hamlet’s state of mind) and that they know the difference between a summary and paraphrase.
- Begin exercises on **Handout 1—Horatio’s Decision Tree** in class. Explain to students that they will complete the tree diagram for homework.

Next Steps

Homework: Students complete the tree in **Handout 1**.

Handout 1. Horatio's Decision Tree

Tree diagrams can help us understand decisions.

The first step in creating a decision tree is to identify the

- decisions—*What am I deciding?*
- uncertainties—*What don't I know for certain about the situation?*
- values—*What is important to me?*

Practice with Horatio's decision at the at the end of 1.1.

Horatio. But, look, the morn in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill;
Break we our watch up; and by my advice
Let us impart what we have seen to-night
Unto young Hamlet; for, upon my life,
This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.

188

Do you consent we shall acquaint him with it,
As needful in our loves, fitting our duty?

192

Marcellus. Let's do 't, I pray; and I this morning know
Where we shall find him most conveniently.

Use details from all of 1.1 to answer the following questions.

What exactly is Horatio (with Marullus and Bernardo) deciding here?

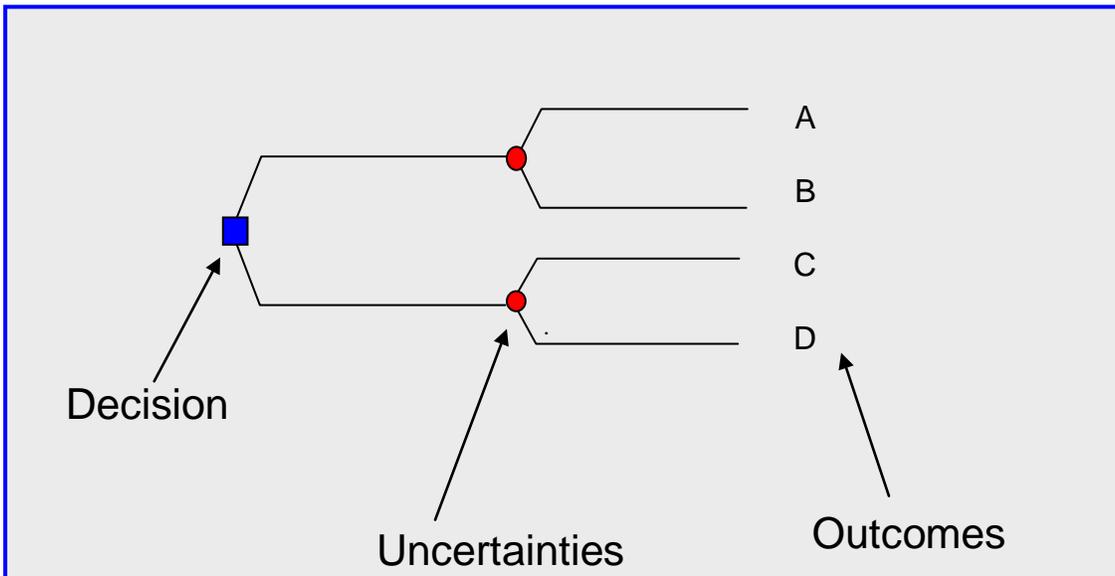
What are the uncertainties about this decision?

What do the men care about?

Decision Tree Review...

1.  Squares represent decision points.  Circles represent uncertainties.

2. We draw trees from *left to right* in *chronological* order: move from first decision and its uncertainties to following choices and uncertainties in order of what happens first, next, and last.



Draw a tree below that represents Horatio's decision at the end of 1.1.
(Hint: Put the two options Horatio considers on the first two tree branches following a square.)

A large empty rectangular box for drawing a decision tree.

Second Class: Building the Tree

Materials

Sample Tree Response and Notes for Teachers

Procedures

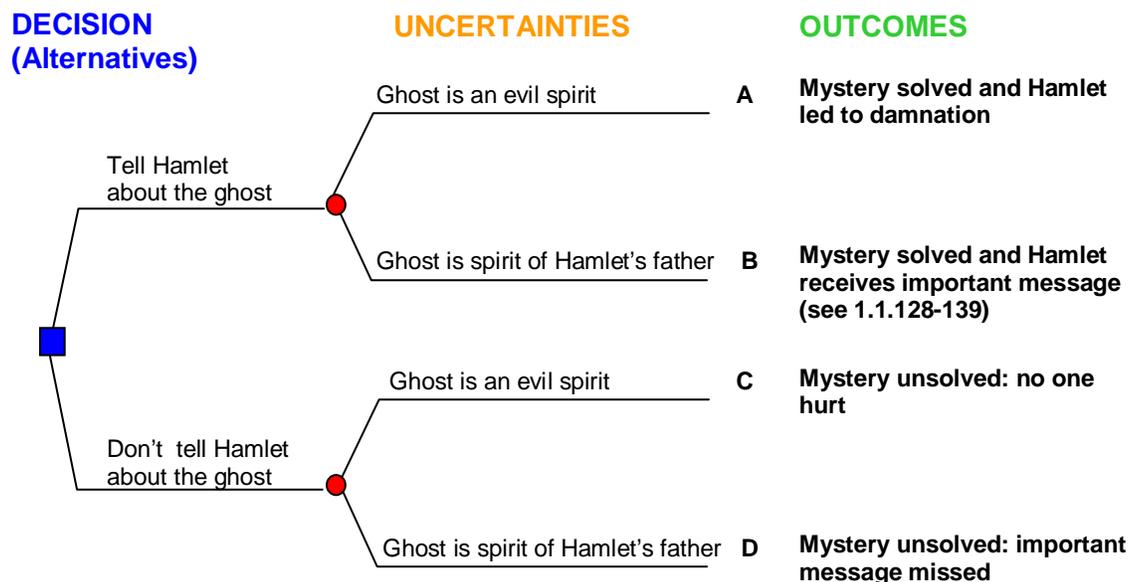
- In either small groups or whole class discussion, ask students to review their findings from the homework assignment. One suggestion is to have a few volunteers draw their trees on the board, or each group draws a tree they agree is their best.
- Once you are satisfied that students understand basic construction of a tree diagram, display the sample tree, and discuss points found in **Sample Tree Response and Notes for Teachers**.

Next Steps

Homework: Read Act 2.

Note: Teachers should break down this reading assignment and add lesson plans as needed for their particular students.)

Sample Tree Response and Notes for Teachers



Points to Emphasize during Discussion (once students have finished reading Act 1)

- Horatio and the guards appear to be driven by curiosity. The ghost does not speak to them; they want to know what it is and why it is there; maybe Hamlet can make it speak.
- The identity and purpose of the ghost is a central, intriguing problem in the play, and a good topic for a class debate (Have students hunt for evidence to support all options). Because the ghost looks like the late King (1.1.57-64), is it Hamlet's father's ghost? Or is it an evil spirit disguised as Hamlet's father and there to cause chaos (1.1.147-165; see also 1.5)? Or is it an hallucination existing only in the mind? Because Horatio and the guards (and later Hamlet as well) see the same ghost, we can rule out hallucination at this point (but Shakespeare raises the possibility in 3.4 just after Hamlet kills Polonius: in that scene Hamlet sees the ghost but his mother does not).
- Horatio and the guards weigh the options according to their obligations of "love" (Horatio is Hamlet's friend) and "duty" (they are all Hamlet's subjects, and the ghost might have an important message for the kingdom). While they recognize the possibility that the spirit could be evil, they decide to "acquaint [Hamlet] with it" (1.1.172). If they believed there was a good chance the ghost was an evil spirit and they had been aware of Hamlet's state of mind—he first appears on stage in a melancholy funk—they might have decided differently. See **Hamlet's first soliloquy 1.2.129-159**. It's never a good idea to introduce a depressed person to an evil spirit.
- Horatio's decision creates a problem for Hamlet. Once Hamlet becomes acquainted with the ghost, he must decide if, when, and how to avenge his father's murder, and this problem becomes the central focus for the rest of the play. "O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.188-189). Hamlet must decide what to do about the ghost's request.
- Optional exercise: have students draw a new tree that includes both Horatio and Hamlet's decisions. Purpose: to emphasize how decisions are connected chronologically.)
- If students have studied *Macbeth*, have them discuss the following topic once they have finished reading *Hamlet*: Most of *Macbeth* describes the outcome of a decision to kill a king (which happens in Act 1); *Hamlet* is about a young man's hesitation to commit the same act. Explore the similarities and differences of these two situations.

Third Class: “A Rogue and Peasant Slave”

Materials

Handout 2—Hamlet’s Second Soliloquy
Teacher Notes for Hamlet’s Second Soliloquy
Handout 3—Hamlet’s Third Soliloquy

Procedures

- Once students have plot details straight, ask them to turn to Hamlet’s second soliloquy (2.2.560-617).
- **Procedural Note:** Depending on the length of classes, **Handout 2** may require two periods. Have students respond (in groups or individually) to the first four questions in **Handout 2**.
- Class regroup to complete questions 5 and 6 together. Ask for two volunteers, an actor and a director. The actor reads lines 399-423 out loud to the class. Follow with class discussion and completion of number 5.
- Next, the director helps the actor read the passage a few more times, giving direction along the way (as described in the handout). The class should watch and give advice.
- Students then complete items 7 through 10 individually or in groups.
- Review responses and discuss points listed in **Teacher Notes for Hamlet’s Second Soliloquy**.

Next Steps

Homework: Students read 3.1. Give them Steps 1-3 in **Handout 3** and ask them to use these steps to review Hamlet’s third soliloquy (3.1.56-90)

Handout 2. Hamlet's Second Soliloquy (2.2.560-617)

Directions: Respond to the following questions. Some require that you paraphrase a passage first.

O! what a rogue and peasant slave am I:
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion, 384
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting 388
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!

PARAPHRASE: _____

1. Hamlet is reacting to a scene he has just witnessed. Why does he call himself a “rogue and peasant slave”?

2. Why does he bring up “passion” here, and what point does he make about it?

What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba
That he should weep for her? What would he do 392
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appall the free, 396
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.

PARAPHRASE: _____

3. In what way and why does Hamlet contrast himself with the actor?

4. How does he use the term “passion” in this passage?

Class regroups. A volunteer actor reads lines 399-423 (“Yet I...About my brain!) aloud. Discuss and answer number 5 below.

5. List in your own words statements Hamlet makes about himself in these lines. What does he say about Claudius?

6. A volunteer director will now guide the actor through this passage a few more times. Imagine you are directing the play. What advice would you give the actor playing Hamlet on the way he should say these line? For example, where is the emotion most intense? Where does it change? Why? And what gestures and position’s do you recommend—kneeling? looking at himself in a mirror? other ideas? The class can give the actor and director advice.

Hamlet concludes this soliloquy with the following lines.

I have heard,
That guilty creatures sitting at a play 424
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak 428
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle; I'll observe his looks;
I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench 432
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil: and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy— 436
As he is very potent with such spirits—
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this: the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

7. These lines describe a decision Hamlet plans to make. What exactly is his decision?

8. Why does he make it? Or in other words, what does he hope to gain from this plan?

9. Do you think his reasoning is sound here? Why or why not?

10. If you were Hamlet, what would you do at this point in the play?

Teachers Notes for Hamlet's Second Soliloquy (2.2.560-617)

Points to emphasize during discussion

1. Make sure students notice that Hamlet wrestles in this soliloquy with his reason (head) and passion or emotion (heart). After comparing his own lack of emotion for revenging his father's murder to the feelings the actor is able to conjure as he talks about Hecuba witnessing the death of her husband, Hamlet attempts to create strong feelings in himself. Students should notice how Hamlet's emotions build as he speaks about Hecuba (lines 569-576), then himself (lines 577-590), and, finally, Claudius (lines 591-593): Hamlet's emotion climaxes at "O Vengeance!" But in the next line—"Why, what an ass am I!" (594)—Hamlet admits that he cannot feel the emotions—he is speaking words that fail to describe anything real in his heart. At this point in the soliloquy, Hamlet resorts to reason: he makes a plan that he thinks will prove once and for all whether or not the ghost speaks the truth and whether or not Claudius is guilty. Final note—while Hamlet's definition of passion includes feeling and emotion, it also incorporates courage: it is this sense of passion that gives us the ability act in the face of uncertainty and risk.

2. Point out to students that Hamlet gives us a good example here of the importance of using BOTH our *head* (reason, information, facts, analysis) AND *heart* (feelings, concern for others, emotions, passion) in making choices. Discuss the premise that "Good decisions *make sense* and *feel right*." On one level this soliloquy demonstrates that the decision to avenge his father does not *feel right* to Hamlet. Therefore, he has not yet been able to commit himself to follow through with the decision. The plan to reenact the murder of a king in front of Claudius, is an attempt by Hamlet to gather more information about the reliability of the ghost and Claudius's guilt.

3. An interesting question to explore here (and to continue discussing throughout the play) is what keeps Hamlet from taking action—from killing Claudius? The young man obviously loved his father, misses him, and is outraged at the thought of his being murdered, especially by Claudius who has married his mother. What is tempering Hamlet's passion and keeping him from action? Possibilities:

- Is it a lack of information? Even though the ghost looks like his father, Hamlet is not sure the spirit is telling the truth. Does lack of information make him unsure?
- Or, is Hamlet struggling with his values: what he wants? Is his desire for revenge tempered by his conscience—his desire to do what is right? (Students should be reminded about the world Shakespeare lived in: he writes his plays in the context of a Judeo-Christian perspective. In this world, human beings are warned that revenge is a self-destructive practice and only God is able to judge the souls of mankind. Murder is forbidden. For evidence see the following passages from the Old and New Testaments: Leviticus 19:18; Romans 12:19; and 1 Thessalonians 5:15.)
- And yet, while revenge is wrong in the Judeo-Christian framework, it is not clear that a 12th century Dane would be wrong to eliminate an enemy of the state who is a murderer and a usurper. A question to consider and debate: Can a good decision *feel* wrong?

4. Ask students to pay close attention to Hamlet's use of the play. Once students have read through 3.3, ask them what they think of Hamlet's information gathering procedure—the play. Does it provide reliable information and conclusive evidence? (For example, would a king have to be guilty to be upset with the performance and Hamlet's behavior?)

Handout 3. Hamlet's Third Soliloquy (3.1.56-90)

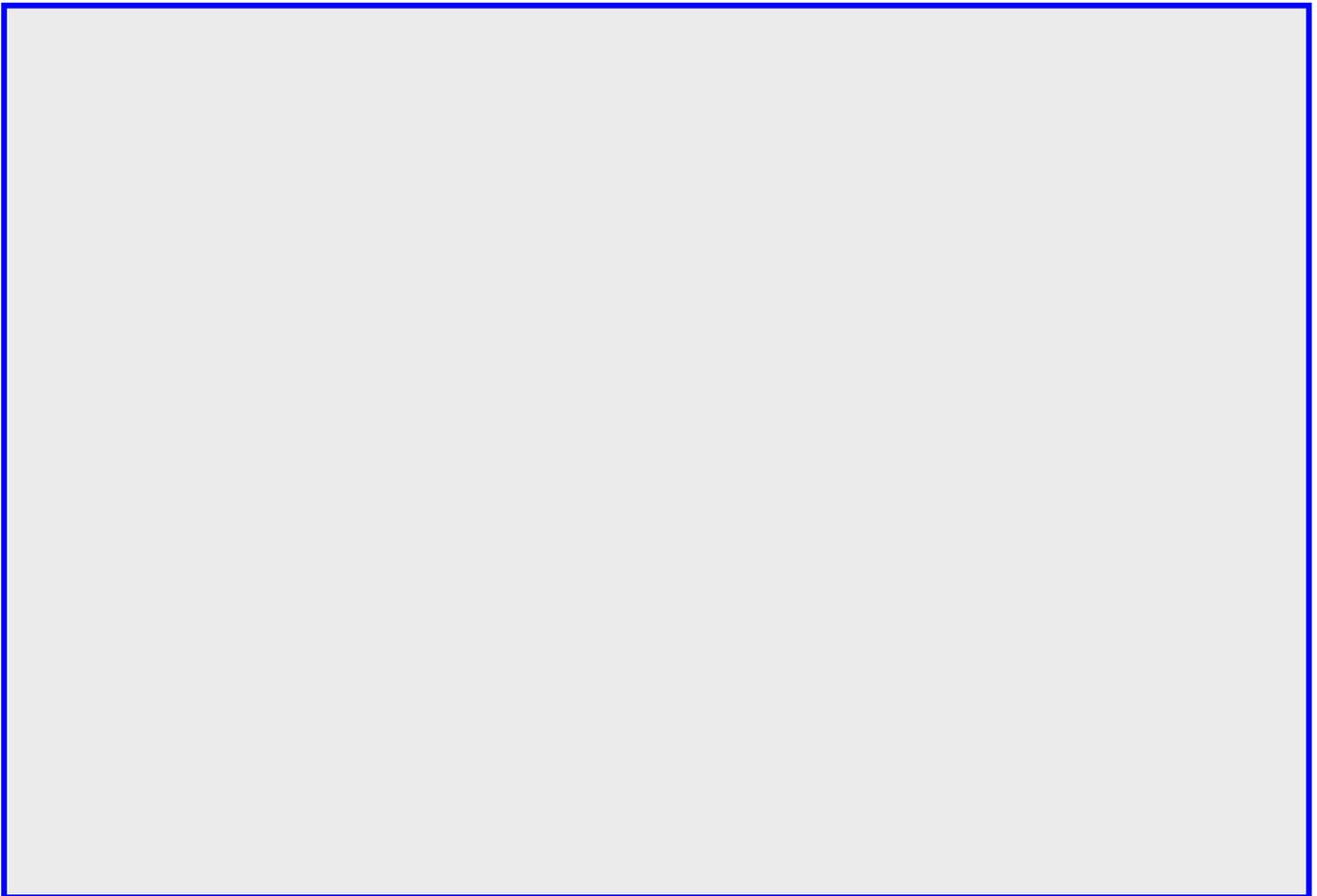
Directions: After studying Hamlet's third soliloquy, follow the steps below to create a tree that represents the decision Hamlet contemplates in this speech.

Step 1. List the alternatives Hamlet defines. (Hint: One of them is "To be")

Step 2. Find and list the two uncertainties he mentions in this passage.

Step 3. Find and list what Hamlet mentions as the possible outcomes of his decision. (Hint: There are three of them.)

Step 4. Now use what you learned from Horatio's decision at the beginning of the play (Student Handout 1) to create a tree for the choice Hamlet describes in this soliloquy.



Fourth Class: “To Be or Not to Be”

Materials

Handout 3—Hamlet’s Third Soliloquy (with first three topics completed)
Sample Tree and Notes for Teachers: Hamlet’s Third Soliloquy

Procedures

- Review students’ responses to items 1-3 of **Students Handout 3**.
- With student input, create the decision tree on the board. See **Sample Tree and Notes for Teachers: Hamlet’s Third Soliloquy**.
- Discuss items 1 and 2 under “Next Steps” in **Sample Tree and Notes for Teachers: Hamlet’s Third Soliloquy**.

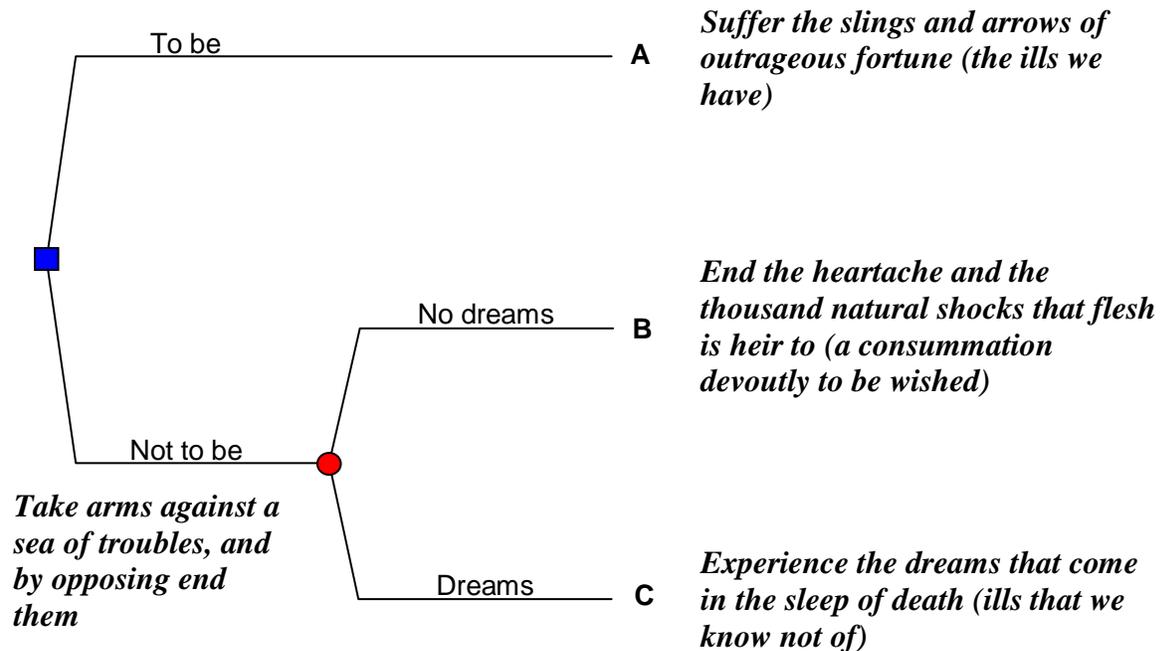
Next Steps

Homework: Finish reading Act 3.

Note: Teachers should break down this reading assignment and add lesson plans as needed for their particular students.

Sample Tree and Notes for Teachers: Hamlet's Third Soliloquy

Hamlet's Decision Tree



Simply drawing the decision tree provides insight into Hamlet's thinking.

Next Steps

1. After reviewing and discussing the students' examples, draw the following tree on the board with student help. Point out that a tree is a tool we can use to help us simplify complicated text as well as complex decision situations.

2. Ask students individually or in groups to paraphrase lines 83-88. Then ask them to discuss what these lines add to the conversation about *head, heart, values, information, and commitment to action* as they relate to Hamlet's decision situation involving Claudius.

Questions to ask during the discussion:

- In Hamlet's thinking, how and why does "conscience" make us "cowards"?
- How are thought and action related here?
- Can we "over think" a situation? Give examples of being paralyzed by too much thinking.
- Is Hamlet simply afraid of the risk (should have acted by now) or is there good reason for him to be stalled in the decision? Explain your opinion.

Fifth Class: A Moment of Decision

Materials

Handout 4—Hamlet’s Fourth Soliloquy

Procedures

- As a class, in small groups, or individually, students complete question 1 through 3 of **Student Handout 4**.
- Brief discussion of responses.
- Begin in class the essay assignment described in **Student Handout 4**.

Next Steps

Homework: Complete the essay assignment at the end of **Students Handout 4**.

Handout 4. Hamlet's Fourth Soliloquy (3.3.73-96)

While Claudius is alone, praying, he does not know that Hamlet observes him. Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius and complete the mission the ghost requested. What happens?

1. Why does Hamlet say Claudius would go to heaven if he killed him (lines 73-78)?
2. In the middle of the passage, Hamlet says, "No." He decides not to kill Claudius. What reason does he give in lines 79-86 for this decision?
3. What plan does Hamlet make in lines 88-96?

Short Essay. Respond to the following question: What new light does this scene shed on Hamlet's decision whether to kill Claudius?

Use the following questions to narrow your focus.

- Values: What does Hamlet care about here? Have his values changes since soliloquy number 3?
- Does he have good reason to stall?

Sixth Class: Hamlet and Fortinbras

Materials

Handout 5—Hamlet’s Fifth Soliloquy

Procedure

- Collect essays for assessment if needed. Discuss responses.
- Assign parts and complete a dramatic reading of Act 4, Scenes 1-4. Discuss any plot questions.
- Have the class begin working on **Handout 5** either individually or in groups.

Next Steps

Homework: Finish **Student Handout 5**.

Handout 5. Hamlet's Fifth Soliloquy (4.4.32-66)

Directions: After studying 4.4.32-66, explore the following topics.

1. In the beginning of this soliloquy (lines 33-45), Hamlet ponders the differences between a beast and a human. List (in the table below) the qualities that Hamlet mentions as characteristic of beasts and mankind.

| BEAST | HUMAN BEING (MAN) |
|-------|-------------------|
| | |

2. According to this passage, what are the essential differences between a beast and a human being?

3. Hamlet claims to have "cause, and will, and strength, and means" (line 45), but he has not taken action. What are the two reasons he suggests for why he has not acted? See lines 39-41.

4. In lines 46-65 Hamlet describes how Fortinbras's example provides an example should spur him on to action. What differences does he see between himself and the Prince of Norway?

5. What is Hamlet's resolve at the conclusion of this scene?

Seventh Class: Beasts, Humans, and Risk

Materials

Teacher Notes for Hamlet's Fifth Soliloquy

Procedures

- Use the following activity to discuss the nature of risk. Hold up a piece of loose leaf paper with lines on both sides. Ask the class the following question: "If I hold this sheet of paper above my head and let it go, would anyone be willing to bet on whether or not it would land on the floor with a lined side facing up?" Ask how much someone would be willing to bet. Why?

Points to elicit from discussion:

- a) Risk has to do with a person's view of uncertainty about a future event.
 - b) There is almost no risk in this situation because both sides of the paper have lines.
 - c) But, is there absolutely no risk in this situation? After asking this question, explain that there is ALWAYS uncertainty about a future event. Students will see right away that the paper could end up landing on a desk instead of the floor. So, if we say it can land anywhere in the classroom, would there be no uncertainty or risk? Again, there is ALWAYS uncertainty about future events. For example, even though it is highly unlikely, the paper could float against the wall and end up leaning on its side. Nevertheless, there is some risk because we do not KNOW what will happen in the future. Ask students for other possibilities (i.e. a gust of wind blows it out of the classroom).
- With these ideas of future uncertainty and risk in mind, turn to a discussion of students' responses to **Handout 5** and **Teacher Notes for Hamlet's Fifth Soliloquy**.

Next Steps:

- Give students time to prepare their soliloquies (see **Performance Task**) and assign deadlines.
- Discuss the following topics with the class. These guidelines are intended to help students with remember the lines and recite them effectively.
 1. Divide the soliloquy into sections. A new section begins when there is a shift of topic or psychological movement.
 2. As you perform, move to a new place or face a new direction for each section.
 3. Imagine what is actually in the direction you are facing—a horizon? a window? a clock? mother's room?
 4. Consider how the cadence will change as you face each new direction.
- To help the class concentrate and to give performers the best circumstances, teachers can schedule students to recite their soliloquies 2 or 3 at a time at the beginning of class until completed. Remember to assign a due date for the written part of the assessment.

Teacher Notes for Hamlet's Fifth Soliloquy (4.4.32-66)

In this soliloquy Hamlet touches on a number of important elements of decision making: risk, outcomes, thought (head), and feeling/courage (heart). As you discuss student responses to the previous topics, emphasize the following points:

1. **Beasts:** sleep and feed; know only the present

Humans: sleep; feed; reason; see past, present, future

2. Understanding and experiencing risk is a result of our ability to reason, to remember the past, and to imagine the future while we live in the present. Hamlet points out here that the Creator gave humans “godlike reason” and we need to use it. According to Hamlet it can be a blessing and a curse: while it makes us more like God, it also keeps us from living simple (beastly) lives that require no thought or concern about how our current choices will affect our future. At this point he appears to be weary of all the “thinking” he has done about his situation.

3. Nearly every important decision requires some risk. When Hamlet mentions the

...craven scruple

Of thinking too precisely on th' event –

A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom

And ever three parts coward (lines 40-43)

he is speaking about the tendency we all have of “over thinking” a situation. To make a decision we need enough information and reasoning—not too much. When we think too much we can fall into unfruitful worry about the outcome, and hesitate to take a risk and make a choice—we can become paralyzed in thought. Hamlet describes himself in this situation. Point out to students that the converse is also true: we can hurt ourselves by neglecting careful thought and reasoning, thereby underestimating the risk and making a harmful decision. (Hamlet's decision to stab the curtain (thereby killing Polonius) and Macbeth's decision to kill King Duncan are good examples.)

4. Hamlet describes Fortinbras as a man

Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,

Makes mouths at the invisible event,

Exposing what is mortal and unsure

To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,

Even for an eggshell. (lines 49-53)

An “invisible event” is an outcome because it exists in the future and is unseen until it happens in the present. Here Hamlet admires Fortinbras' courage to take a risk in spite of many uncertainties (fortune, death, danger), and for something as unimportant as an “eggshell”—nothing like the treachery, deception and murder Hamlet seeks to put right. Because uncertainties and risk are part of all important decisions, making choices always requires some measure of courage, and Hamlet suggests in this soliloquy and a previous one that his over-thinking might be related to a lack of bravery (see line 43). Good material for a student debate.

5. As he continues to compare himself to Fortinbras in lines 56-65, Hamlet again mentions the role of head and heart in his decision situation: He says that the situation he faces (father murdered and mother deceived) creates “[e]xcitements of [his] reason and [his] blood” (line 58). His current balance of reason (head) and passion (heart) lead to his conclusion: “O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” **Note:** Ask students to consider Hamlet's alternatives at this point. Does his decision situation allow for only a “bloody” solution? What are other possible alternatives?

2. Assessment Evidence

Shakespeare in Action:

Goal: Make it clear to an actor playing Hamlet how to deliver one of the five soliloquies.

Role: You are Shakespeare directing your new play, *Hamlet*, for the first time.

Audience: Members of the production, the actor (Hamlet) in particular.

Situation: The person playing Hamlet is having a hard time getting one of the soliloquies right. You are not satisfied with the way he has delivered the lines so far, and you suspect that the actor does not fully understand the situation—and even the play. You are excited about your latest tragedy, and you know it by heart. You have decided to help the actor by performing the soliloquy during rehearsal. And then you plan to send him home with some written ideas to consider about the lines.

Product:

1) Recite/perform the soliloquy you choose to the troupe (class).

2) Write 1-3 pages of notes on the soliloquy. These notes should be in the form of explanation and direction for the actor. Make sure you touch on the following topics:

- Why Hamlet makes the speech
- Where emotion becomes intense and subsides in the soliloquy
- What the soliloquy reveals about Hamlet's decision making skills
- How Hamlet's thought here is connected to the larger decision to avenge his father's murder

Standards for Success:

Performance of soliloquy:

command of the language;
clear enunciation;
effective pace (varied as needed);
appropriate gestures

Performance Tips

- Divide the soliloquy into sections. A new section begins when there is a shift of topic or psychological movement.
- As you perform, move to a new place or face a new direction for each section.
- Imagine what is actually in the direction you are facing—a horizon? a window? a clock? mother's room?
- Consider how the cadence will change as you face each new direction.

Written comments to the actor:

imagination—have fun imagining and reacting to your actor's problems;
accuracy—keep details consistent with the play;
clarity—make sure your comments about Hamlet and his decision skills and situation are as clear and precise as possible.

3. Resources on the Web

--Electronic Versions of the Play

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/>

An MIT website.

<http://www.bartleby.com/46/2/>

Bartelby website—Harvard Classic version with an introductory note.

<http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/playmenu.php?WorkID=hamlet>

Open source Shakespeare version includes concordance and search features. Includes all plays.

--Background and Lesson Ideas

<http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/background.html>

British Library site: wealth of background information, learning resources, and links

<http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/ham/hamtg.html>

Schools of California On-Line Resources for Teachers