LESSON: CLOSE-READING A SOLILOQUY, ACTIVELY!

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

Soliloquies are full of possibilities. Getting students inside a soliloquy can lead to all kinds of deep reading and surprising discoveries about the words, characters, and big questions of a play.

You can teach this lesson as its own close-reading exercise or as part of a larger Shakespeare unit. As a pre-reading lesson, it’s a great introduction to Shakespeare’s language, but it’s also useful for teaching a soliloquy in context, right when the speech occurs in the play.

By the end of this exercise, ALL students will have spoken and read Shakespeare’s original language multiple times; discovered that soliloquies are internal arguments; discussed various student interpretations of this soliloquy; and, in a lively and authentic way, explored all those cool things going on with complex texts: tone, structure, characterization, and big ideas.

SOME SUGGESTED SOLILOQUIES:

*Romeo and Juliet* 4.3.15-60

*Hamlet* 3.1.64-98

*Hamlet* 3.3.40-76

*Julius Caesar* 2.1.10-36

*Macbeth* 1.7.1-28

THE PLAY-BY-PLAY:

1. Have all of your students get in a circle.

2. Ask the whole class to read the whole speech chorally—all together—as quickly as they can, and as loudly as they can.

3. The class next reads the speech sequentially—singly, one speaker after another. Ask that each student read aloud from the beginning to an end punctuation—a period, semicolon, question mark or exclamation point. (*Read right through a comma.*) And begin. After the first student reaches an end punctuation, the next person picks it up and reads to the next end punctuation.
Like this (example from Juliet’s speech in *Romeo and Juliet 4.3.15-60*):

Student 1: Farewell.
Student 2: God knows when we shall meet again.
Student 3: I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins / That almost freezes up the heat of life.
Student 4: I'll call them back again to comfort me.

... and so on around the circle. If everyone hasn’t gotten a chance to read, start the passage again so that everyone has the chance.

4. The class reads sequentially, to the end of the poetic line. Ask students to read quickly, sounding as much as they can like one voice. A midstream example from the same Juliet speech:

Student 11: What if it be a poison which the Friar
Student 12: Subtly hath ministered to have me dead,
Student 13: Lest in this marriage he should be dishonored
Student 14: Because he married me before to Romeo?
Student 15: I fear it is. And yet methinks it should not,

5. Two students volunteer to come into the center of the circle and, facing one another, read to end punctuation again, alternating lines.

Example:

Student 1: Farewell.
Student 2: God knows when we shall meet again.
Student 1: I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins / That almost freezes up the heat of life.
Student 2: I'll call them back again to comfort me.

... and so on.

6. Divide the entire class into two choruses, facing each other, behind the two students who just read. Each chorus reads to an end punctuation, as before, and alternating lines, just as the two volunteers had done in the previous step. **Ask them to read louder than ever, and to get angry. Ask them to verbally throw their lines at the chorus opposite.**

7. Debrief and reflect. Ask what's happened during this work. Students regularly have the following observations, included here because they might be useful for discussion prompts:

- Even though we didn’t talk about meaning, the meaning gets clearer with repetition.
- I thought it would be boring to re-read this so many times, but it’s not.
- Reading wasn’t so intimidating when we were all doing it together.
- I noticed that I could actually understand a lot on my own, without anyone explaining anything to me.
- The speech is Juliet (or whichever character speaks the speech you’re using) arguing with herself, and all soliloquies are arguments like this.
8. **Bonus!** To add another layer, ask students to “chunk” the soliloquy: have students work in small groups (3-4) to identify the competing voices in this speech. Remind students that soliloquies are, as they have just discovered, internal arguments. If students ask how many voices they should be finding, tell them it’s up to them. There’s no single right way to do this, but they should be ready to defend their choices.

After 5-10 minutes, ask each group to share out. Display the soliloquy on the board, and ask each group to use a marker (dry erase or digital, depending on your classroom technology) to label the voices they found. Once every group has gone to the board, let everyone discuss what they notice. Here are some prompts:

- **What do you notice?**
- **How many voices are there in this speech? How can you tell?** (Resist arriving at a single answer. If different groups have good reasons for different interpretations, let those differences be.)
- **Where did groups agree, and where did groups disagree? What do you notice about the places in the speech where some of you disagreed about what was going on?**
- **Which voice “wins”? How can you tell?** (Again, invite students to defend their own claims here.)
- **Does this soliloquy affect how you understand this character? If so, how?**
- **If you’re doing this activity before students have started reading the play, you can ask students to make some predictions about the play.**

If time permits, invite groups to perform their group’s marked up soliloquy as a dramatic dialogue, with different students playing the different voices.

**HOW DID IT GO?**

If all of your students have
- spoken Shakespeare’s language multiple ways,
- become more confident, skillful, and joyful in reading this language,
- worked together to make meaning from it,
- and developed a deep connection to this soliloquy,
then it’s all good!

**Bonus!** Here’s one assessment idea: after each reading of the speech, ask students to show on their hands their comprehension level. Use the “fist to 5” approach: 1 finger = “I don’t understand at all”, and 5 fingers = “I can explain it to someone else.” Students should be raising 5 fingers by the end!