



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2016 Volume I: Shakespeare and the Scenes of Instruction

Containing Multitudes: Role-Playing and Identity in Literature

Guide for Curriculum Unit 16.01.04
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This unit focuses on how characters' identities are constructed in text. When we read, how do we know that a character is acting or speaking according to his or her true nature? When are those actions or speech the result of a role that has been assumed? Using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an anchor text, students will explore these questions at length in order to analyze the central character. This unit will allow students the opportunity to differentiate between an individual's (relatively) permanent identity and the various parts that same individual might play in various situations. As they read the play, students will constantly reevaluate Hamlet based on specific lines and interactions with other characters. Under what circumstances does the prince reveal himself truthfully, and why?

This study is particularly relevant to high school students, who often grapple with issues of identity and to reconcile actions and speech that may seem to contradict one's true nature. By closely examining the variety of ways in which Hamlet can be read as a character, students will develop an understanding of how to regard personality as a multifaceted quality.

Concurrently, students will conduct an investigation of a character in an independent reading book using the same framework. How does this character display his or her true nature in certain situations, and how does he or she assume temporary roles elsewhere? This independent study, along with the class-wide examination of *Hamlet*, will provide the foundation for students' performance tasks for this unit. Students will write a paper in which they explain the difference between role playing and establishment of true identity. Using evidence found in *Hamlet* and their chosen independent reading book, each student will conduct a deep analysis of how an individual may assume several roles to achieve a desired goal, while also maintaining a separate, stable identity.

(Developed for English, grade 9)

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