

How Shakespeare Helps Boys Deal with Questions of Identity:



Honor, Courage, Manhood, Purpose

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Who Am I?



All boys have questions about their identities.

They seek to answer these questions as they explore literature, film, history, sports, the arts, science, mathematics, and the realm of experience.



They are searching for a personal style, a set of values, a code of behavior, and a sense of purpose that will anchor them in the free-floating world of existence and allow them to relate productively with other human beings.



One of the reasons for reading great literature, discussing it, and writing about it is to clarify the answers to those questions about identity and purpose.

So who is the author who raises these questions most often and with the greatest power?

Shakespeare Knows

Shakespeare has addressed these questions in innumerable ways in the plays he has written.



Shakespeare's Questions

One measure of a literary work is the extent to which it raises questions that allow the reader to examine the human condition.

Shakespeare's questions about the human condition are both deep and broad.



What Is a Man?

One of the most pressing questions boys ask of themselves and of the world around them as they are growing up is about the nature of "being" itself.





What is the role of a man?

What does it mean to “be”?

And what makes “being” worthwhile?



“What is a man, if the chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more”
(*Hamlet*).

Should there be more to a man’s life than the struggle for subsistence?



Even if your life is filled with abundance, is it right to live a life of sleeping and eating, without effort or struggle? Is this a desirable kind of life?

“We want to know the reality of the human condition? Then we must know the reality of the world. Rigel does not care about humanity as it burns white-blue infinities away. Betelgeuse and Arcturus couldn’t care less. But we feel some preternatural throbbing of the nature of nature aching in our souls. We do not want the world to be a coagulation of atoms. We want the moon to be more than the moon. So we conjure the world ‘ontology’ and ask ourselves, ‘Is there a reality of higher dimensions lurking behind the pasteboard mask of material, or is the metaphysical aching simply a dark placebo?’”
(Mark O’Meara)



"What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action, how like an angel, in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (*Hamlet*, Act II)

Seeming and Being

The Call to a Life of Authenticity



The Authentic Self



"Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show—
These but the trappings and the suits of woe."
(*Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. ii)



Developing the Self

Our boys want to develop a self that "passes show": they want to become people who have integrity, who show honor, and who are genuine.

The Need for Purpose



"O God, God,/How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (*Hamlet*)

"What should such fellows as I do,
crawling between earth and heaven?"
(*Hamlet*, Act III, sc. i)



What part shall I play on the stage of the world?

In the world of Shakespeare, "being" is an "act" that takes place on the great "stage." One of our tasks as beings is to decide the part we choose to play and/or to accept honorably and nobly the part that Necessity chooses for us. Multiple "roles" are available to us in our lives: those of husband, father, student, employer, son, detached observer, investment banker, poet...the list goes on and on. So how to choose...? One way is to seek an "authentic" way of being.

The Desire for Authenticity



"This above all, to thine own self be true
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

What Are the Masks I Wear?



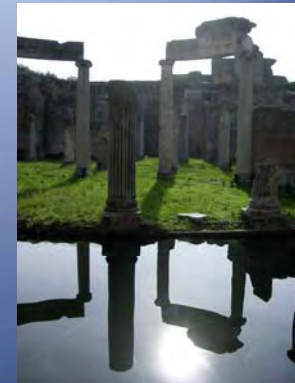
“Personal authenticity is an important trait, though it is often veiled in masks. In *Hamlet*, Polonius urges his son, Laertes, “This above all, to thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man (Hamlet, Act I, Sc. 3). By saying what one feels in his or her core, one does not need to veil oneself in masks, for masks can be very difficult to remove. Polonius does not seem to realize, however, that pure authenticity and society are mutually exclusive, for when one holds up his self to the world, he opens himself to the scorn that comes with such an act.” (Travis Hillier)

How does a person become authentic and unique?

Hamlet finds the answer to this question through his horror at finding the truth that life—all life—even the greatest (Alexander) is brief, transitory, impermanent, and that even fame, wealth, success are in the end brought to dust. Hamlet’s scars and his cosmic humility define him. His grief both connects him with all humanity and makes of him a unique singularity.

“What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis,
whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand’ring
stars, and makes them
Stand/Like wonder-
wounded hearers?”

(*Hamlet*, Act. V, Sc. i)



“It is I, Hamlet the Dane.”



Hamlet Claims His Work

As Hamlet learns to understand the deep currents of feeling within himself and the dark pockets of despair and grief that lurk underneath his idealistic view of the world, he begins to “own” his being for the first time, resolving to act in a way that resonates with meaning and personal impact. He finds his “work”: seeking justice and right rule of law for the kingdom of Denmark.

How Shall I Then Live?

Solitude, sterility, and alienation

OR

community, productivity, and identification?

The aloof antihero stranded in entropy vs. the engaged hero anchored in community: which is for you?

“The failure to act keeps Hamlet insular, aloof, and unable to connect with others. In fact, Hamlet cannot even escape the prison of the self.” (Travis Hillier)



HAMLET: Denmark's a prison.

ROSENCRANTZ: Then is the world one.

HAMLET: A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst.

ROSENCRANTZ: We think not so, my lord.

HAMLET: Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me it is a prison.

ROSENCRANTZ: Why then, your ambition makes it one; 'tis too narrow for your mind.

HAMLET: O God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

**HOW DO PEOPLE
ENDURE THE FEAR OF
DEATH AND LEARN TO
ACT WITH RESOLVE
AND HONOR?**

"If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all."

(Act 5, Sc. 2, *Hamlet*)



"Let be." (Hamlet, Act V, Sc. ii)



How do I find peace and serenity in a turbulent world?

"Finally, Hamlet's paralysis is over, so finally, action can occur. Until action is committed, human beings will remain, like Hamlet, in a state of brooding and aloofness, for without action, the prison of the self is inescapable. The most tragic moment of the play, however, is that it took Hamlet too long to emerge from his chrysalis, and the sudden burst of action consumed his life. It was Hamlet's actions that healed his soul, not his scheming and conniving flesh." (Travis Hillier)

The Play's the Thing

To have the courage to grow into manhood, a boy must have the conviction that his actions, right or wrong, *matter*. In the following excerpt from a student paper, a young man follows Hamlet in his quest for personal significance.



“Unfortunately, Hamlet has to endure five harsh acts in order to realize that the play’s title bears only one thing: his name...Hamlet’s melancholy, antiheroic stance at the beginning of the play rapidly transforms into a hypercritical attitude in which he battles fiercely with the abyss of nihilism. Finally, Hamlet comes to the conclusion that rather than continue his melancholy, crazy, nihilistic behavior, he must own the play. Hamlet takes charge of his own play upon realizing that he is really the only character who matters.” (Beau Falgout)

“Only in the final act does Hamlet realize that he possesses the power to control the “play.” He can continue to question the legitimacy of life, or he can mature into the only significant character by leaving behind all of his past mentalities that hamper his character from achieving true greatness. Hamlet realizes at the end of the play that the only thing that is significant is the drama of the play. He chooses to know that the world around him is not complete without him, and he triumphantly and bravely dies for the good of the play. It is finally *his* play.” (Beau Falgout)

The Purpose of Boys



In Michael Gurian’s new book, he explores the idea that boys need a sense of purpose to be successful and whole.

Magical Boys

According to Gurian, a boy needs to experience himself early on as a “magical” boy who has power to “save the world.”

This sense is often experienced through mentors who share their capabilities and strengths through teaching and modeling.

Raising the Magical Boy

Boys need to find magical “Merlins” who will apprentice them to a kind of healthy servitude that will result in the acquisition of self-discipline and powerful abilities.



Some of Shakespeare’s plays provide such mentors, and many other serve as springboards through which adults can lead boys through the tempests of adolescence.



The Tempest

In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, a powerful magician, Prospero, has an opportunity to influence the lives of several young male characters, educating them, for good or ill, in the ways of honor, courage, and purpose.



Caliban

The darkest of these figures is Caliban, a young boy whom Prospero finds on the island when he arrives there. This boy loses his mother and is solely reliant on Prospero for his upbringing and education.

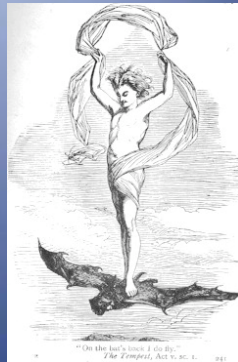


Early on, Caliban mocks his teacher, Prospero, saying, “You taught me language, and my profit on’t is, I know how to curse.”



Ariel

The next character that Prospero “raises” is Ariel, a blithe spirit who has been imprisoned in a “cloven pine” until Prospero frees him, only to put him under obligation to serve his master until such time as his tasks have been fulfilled.



Ferdinand and Miranda

Prospero also influences two human adolescents, Miranda, his own daughter, and Ferdinand, the son of his enemy. This young man, too, he puts under his direction, setting him difficult tasks and forcing him to work for that which he loves with patience, endurance, and perseverance. In the end, Prospero finds him worthy to be the husband of his own precious daughter.

Gurian tells us that educators and parents should so direct their boys that “boyhood is not a mundane, ‘boring’ encounter with air, people, buildings, or whatever is around him, but in fact becomes more: a place of personal transformation wherein young males can change, every day, into miraculous beings who can save the world, alter the course of planets, rescue and protect the vulnerable, and become admired for having been good, true, and purposeful throughout the journey” (37).

The Call to a Life of Leadership and Satisfying Work



The Education of the Hero

A sense of the necessity of sacrifice and the enduring of pain for a purpose is a crucial element in the development of boys who will become “heroic” men. Gurian puts forth the thesis that boys who are trained in the mindset of heroism will become men with a sense of great purpose and mission.

Work for Warriors

One crucial element in a boy’s struggle to become a good man is his search for good, difficult, and meaningful work to do.

He yearns to become a “warrior” who uses his aggressive impulses and abundant energy to bring order and prosperity to his community.

Othello and Macbeth

Two Shakespearean characters who struggle with their “warrior” roles are Othello and Macbeth.



Pride and Prejudice

Othello is the proud, respected commander of the forces that protect Venice. He uses his command and his abilities to bring order to his troops and protection to his adopted country. But when his self-respect is shaken by the lies of one of his subordinates, he loses trust in himself and in those who love him. He allows jealousy and fear to goad him to violence against the very thing he holds most dear, losing his self-control, his reason, his position, and his life in the end.

Race and Respect

Othello's Achilles' heel is his race, and his insecurity about the place his race affords him in civilization. When boys study this character, they examine the forces that might operate on a person of color in a racist society and explore the ramifications of basing one's self-regard on a cultural stereotype. How does one develop an identity free of the stereotypes imposed by a person's culture? How does a person pursue his own meaningful work in the world under the pressure of racist forces and bigotry?

The Wrong Work

Macbeth is a successful warrior who directs his strength and power toward serving narrow and selfish aims rather than the broader purposes of establishing order, justice, and mercy for his civilization. He loses his personal and professional honor as he strays further and further from his personal ideals of loyalty, service, and honesty. His proper “work” of “saving the world” becomes perverted to the service of personal ambition.

The Good Work of the Noble Man

In Shakespeare's works, we see many models of the great prince, the good man, the noble father, the effective leader. Henry V is one example of such a good leader and a good man. As Shakespeare follows this wayward boy who becomes a good man through several plays, the reader examines questions of responsibility, maturation, and heroism.

Honor and Justice

Another crucial component in the development of a boy is his development of a sense of honor and justice that can function as a guiding light to a man with free will.

"Honor is the way a hero survives every suffering—he can say, 'Though I suffer, I acted honorably.' Honor is a pact the hero makes, saying, 'I will carry in myself throughout my life an invisible covenant with justice and purpose, and thus will know I have always done good...'"
(Michael Gurian)

Gurian postulates the idea that the "magical boy" learning his unique gifts and loved for his energy, strength, and ability to manipulate the world around him will become a "seeker" who looks for opportunities to "save the world," to use his strength and resolve with purpose and heroic honor.



The Battle of the Self

According to Gurian, male development in adolescence becomes a battle between the primitive and the civilized aspects of the self. A sense of purpose is crucial in the choice a boy makes about the kind of manhood he wants to achieve. The outcome of this battle of the self is to determine what kind of leadership role a boy will accept as he matures.

King Lear and Leadership

In *King Lear*, we witness the tragic story of a man who voluntarily leaves the life of seeking, striving, and fighting for justice and honor, with disastrous consequences. Lear “retires” from his kingship, keeping his position in name only and handing over his responsibilities to his feckless and disloyal daughters, thus causing disorder in his kingdom.

Kent

In the character of Kent, Lear’s loyal, disguised retainer, Shakespeare shows us a foil for Lear’s abrogation of responsibility: a man who seeks the life of good service and honest engagement with humanity.



AS THE PLAY PROGRESSES, LEAR SHEDS EACH LAYER OF THE “SELF” HE THINKS HE IS.



- He first voluntarily relinquishes his good work of ruling the kingdom.
- Next, he allows his pride to overmaster his love for his daughter Cordelia, thus losing her from his life.
- He then fires his most loyal friend and retainer, Kent.
- Shortly afterward, he is stripped of his illusion that his other two daughters love him. Their cruelty divests him of the cushion of security and care that is provided by family.
- He next loses his physical comfort, his shelter, even his clothing, and then, finally, his reason.
- Last, he is cruelly stripped of hope itself and possesses only the bleak acceptance of his naked humanity.

This terrible spectacle forces the viewer to examine his own life in the face of the reality of the human condition and to assess the importance of love and meaningful engagement with others.



“It is his [King Lear’s] quest that defines him as a hero; he alone in the play nobly attempts to drill down to ontology’s core to arrive at the very fundamental nature of the self. King Lear, at the beginning of the play, maps out his aims: to strip away every existential definition he has build around himself to arrive at a sparkling singularity of self, like an oyster trying to shed the layers of the pearl of its life to uncover the grain of sand at its soul.” (Mark O’Meara)

“Stranded on the stormy heath, Lear cries out, ‘Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal...Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here!’ (King Lear, Act 3, Sc. 4). Indeed, nothing lies behind the pasteboard mask; nothing lies at the center of humanity’s actions. Men and women can be defined only by what they do in the world.” (Mark O’Meara)

“But Lear remains a hero, and even at the bottom of the abyss, he learns, as Hamlet did, how to find happiness and wisps of meaning and solace in the brutality of the world. He accepts the role of his being in the final moments of his life through the unconditional love of his daughter Cordelia. Facing not inward nor outwards (for the abyss lies in both), he turns his consciousness away from the tragic fate of his life, and away from the empty cavity of his self, to a third dimension where he can cleanse himself in the love of his daughter. It is in love that King Lear manages to accept the chaotic substancelessness of the unadorned self.” (Mark O’Meara)

Shakespeare and the Path to Manhood

Here's what the boys say...



“First, we are pushed to truth by a need. Second, it is possible to find that truth. Third, to find the truth one must face the darkness and survive. None of these works of literature suggest that this process is by any means easy, or that everyone is meant to gain this sort of enlightenment. These works are how-to guides, explaining ways to read the pages in the book of life. We must learn from them, apply their wisdom, and continue to journey on toward the truth.” (Drew Nicholas)

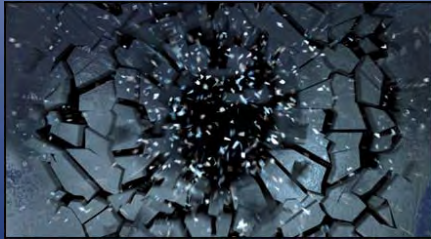


“[In Hamlet] Shakespeare is shouting to the [audience] that what matters is that the necessary character fulfills his purpose. At first, Hamlet is far, far removed from this realization. His dejection grows so that he wants out of the play altogether. However, as the play reaches its climactic finale, Hamlet has an epiphany that eternalizes him...”



“Not a whit, we defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.” (*Hamlet*, Act V, Scene ii).

“Here, Hamlet becomes real. He shatters his one-dimensionality with the epiphany that as a character in the play, he must own the play for the sake of the play....to be real, to exist, to assert presence, is the most heroic quality in literature.” (Beau Falgout)



“...these characters are not fiction in the traditional sense. They are as alive as any human being...reading Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has instilled in me a desire to emulate Hamlet’s quiet intelligence. This change in my outlook, then, changes my reality. Hamlet’s reality, however, never changes. So, in fact, this character is more real than any human could be, as behind Hamlet’s ‘antic disposition’ is the same solid oak that William Shakespeare produced, never changing, weathering the years like a promontory of solid stone.” (Travis Hillier)