

A DEEP, POETIC
JOURNEY INTO
SOMETHING

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY
Forrest Musselman



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Jane wants to break out of her box. Colour cows green and the sky purple. She wants a deep poetic journey into something. The problem is she has no idea where to start.

Background

This play was first performed by the students of Rushford-Peterson High School on January 15th, 2011, at the Three-Rivers Conference One-Act Play Festival in Wabasha-Kellogg, MN. The play went on to win several competitions, resulting in the honor of performing at the state level on February 10, 2011 as part of the Minnesota State High School League.

Playwright Bio

Forrest Musselman lives in the lovely corner of southeastern Minnesota with his wife and two children. He teaches English and Theatre Arts at Rushford-Peterson High School and has published numerous plays through Brooklyn Publishers, Heuer, Big Dog Publishing, YouthPlays, Contemporary Drama Service and Theatrefolk.

Synopsis

Jane wants more out of life than conformity. She wants to break free from living in a box. But she doesn't know what to do and has no idea who she wants to be. Her guidance counsellor is pushing her to make a career decision, by following the results of an aptitude test right into another box. She finds out second hand that her dad is sick and he didn't tell her. Her friends are making out-of-the-box choices. All she sees is a black hole of nothing as her life destination. Jane reacts the only way she knows how, by giving up and pushing everyone away. But it turns out she has people in her life who care very much about her, whoever she is and whatever she decides. Jane realizes that she has to stop focusing on the destination and live the journey. When you do that, it doesn't matter what's at the end.

Characters

JANE: [W] A senior in high school who strives to break out of the box.

MOM: [W] Jane's mother and a free-spirited artist.

DAD: [M] Jane's father who would rather stay in the box.

MARY: [W] Jane's friend who lives way outside the box.

DAN: [M] Jane's friend who is so outside the box it's not even funny.

JOHN: [M] Jane's friend who wants to be a bit more.

MRS. HATE: [W] Wants Jane to stay in the box.

SHADOWS: All Shadows have no dialogue, communicating instead through mime.

Themes

Individuality, conformity, self-image, personal responsibility, relationships

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What does the phrase "break out of the box" mean to you?
- ★ What does it mean to live in a box?
- ★ What does it mean to conform?
- ★ What do you conform to? What do you break away from?
- ★ How do you see yourself?
- ★ How do you think others see you?
- ★ Do you see yourself as an individual? Why or why not?
- ★ Would you rather blend into a group or stand out? Why?

- ★ What do you think the future holds for you?
- ★ What do you do when people tell you things you don't like to hear?
- ★ Do you fight for what you believe in? Why or why not?

Pre-Read Activities

Identity Chart

- ★ Have students make an identity chart for themselves. An identity chart visualizes different aspects of the question, "Who am I?"
 - » Students will need paper and something to write with.
 - » You may want to complete an identity chart for yourself as a model.
- ★ An identity chart starts with students putting their name in a circle or square in the middle of the page.
- ★ Then students draw lines from the centre. At the end of each line, students write one word that describes them (tall, sister, Canadian, drama club, piano). Possible categories include:
 - » Family identity
 - » Social identity
 - » Background
 - » Physical appearance
- ★ Ask students to reflect on the final product. What shapes their identity?
- ★ Ask students to choose what they think is the most important part of their identity and write a paragraph describing why.

Break out of the Box Tableau Series

- ★ In groups, students will discuss and decide what it means to “live in a box” and what it means to “break out of a box.” What does the box represent?
- ★ Groups will create a tableau series of three pictures. Everyone must participate in the tableaux. Each picture will represent the following:
 - » One: A visual representation of what it means to “live in a box.”
 - » Two: A visual representation of what it means to “break out of the box.”
 - » Three: A visual representation of the results of their choice. Who is happy to break out of the box? Who wants to get back in the box? Who wants to be an individual? Who would rather stay in a group?
- ★ Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class.
- ★ Discuss afterward. What are the similarities and differences of the visual representations?

Break out of the Box Original Scene

- ★ As a class, discuss what it means to “live in a box” and what it means to “break out of a box.” What does the box represent?
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create an original scene on what it means to break out of a box. How do groups theatricalize the “box”?
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.

Stay in the Box Original Scene

- ★ Ask students if they have had someone in their life try to “keep them in a box,” whatever that means to them. Do you have an example that you could share as well? Was there a time when you wanted to go in a certain direction and someone tried to hold you back?
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create an original scene where someone tries to go in a certain direction and they are held back. How do others make sure that the character “stays in the box”?
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.

Written Activity: Who is Your Shadow Self?

- ★ Start with a class discussion on the question “What is a shadow self?” What does the word shadow mean to students? What does the term “shadow self” mean to students? Does the word shadow only have negative connotations? Does your shadow self ever overtake your real self? Does your shadow self stop you from doing things?
- ★ Have students write a descriptive paragraph on their shadow self. How do they see them? How do they connect/communicate with their shadow self? Do they try to ignore them? If so, are they successful?

Written Activity: Shadow Self Perspective

- ★ Start with a class discussion on the question “What is a shadow self?” What does the word shadow mean to students? What does the term “shadow self” mean to students? Does the word shadow only have negative connotations? Does your shadow self ever overtake your real self? Does your shadow self stop you from doing things?
- ★ Have students write a monologue from the perspective of a shadow self. How does the shadow see itself? How does the shadow self see them? Do they like staying in the shadows? Would they rather come out of the shadows? What do they want, and what will they do to get what they want?

Original Scene: Who is Your Shadow Self?

- ★ Start with a class discussion on the question “What is a shadow self?” What does the word shadow mean to students? What does the term “shadow self” mean to students? Does the word shadow only have negative connotations? Does your shadow self ever overtake your real self? Does your shadow self stop you from doing things?
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will visually represent the “shadow self” in an original scene. It could be that one character has multiple shadows following them, or each person in the scene has their own shadow. The goal is to show the difference between the real self and the shadow self. How does the shadow self act?
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse and present.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward. What are the similarities and differences in the ways the groups visually represent the shadow self?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it’s being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can’t highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *A Deep Poetic Journey Into Something*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. Finish this sentence: "We go to school in boxes where they teach us how to _____."
3. Who is the teacher that tells Jane she needs to colour inside the lines?
4. What colour does Jane colour the cow?
5. True or False: Jane's parents stay together.
6. What does Mary call Jane?
7. What career does Jane's guidance counselor say would be a good fit?
8. Does Jane agree to go out with John?
9. Why had Jane's dad been missing their weekends?
10. Finish this sentence: "It's always easier to give up than to _____ for what you believe in."
11. What is the key idea of the play?
12. Do you have any questions about the story?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. Why has the playwright chosen to use shadow figures to help tell the story? What do the shadows represent?
2. Read the description of the set. The set is fairly simple using scrims, acting blocks, and a platform. How would the set impact the staging of the play?
3. Do you think the set fits the play? What would you do differently? Describe the set design you would create for the play.

4. Based on Jane's language, behaviour, and personality, how would you costume this character?
5. Analyze Dan's use of language. What kind of words does he use? What can you infer about his character based on his vocabulary and word choice?
6. What is the significance of the line, "They may have broken the rules, but they all knew them first"?
7. What is the significance of the line, "That it's better he hides in his little box than tell me what's going on"?
8. What is the significance of the line, "But it wasn't the Nothing I was supposed to be focusing on, but the journey itself. That's the poetic part"?
9. Are there any words you don't understand? Identify and define them.
10. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *A Deep Poetic Journey into Something*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about individuality? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with individuality with what happens in the play.
4. In your opinion, what is going to happen with the relationship between Jane and John?
5. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ Did any scene make you think about your identity and individuality?
- ★ Should anyone else be able to define your identity? Why or why not?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?

Post-Read Activities

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Set Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

Sound Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would create a sound design for the play. Based on the themes in the play, what sounds, pieces of music, or styles of music would they use?
- ★ Create a playlist for the play.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward:
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Line Tableau

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a line from the play such as, "It's always easier to give up than to fight for what you believe in."
- ★ Each group will discuss and decide how to visualize this line in a tableau.
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?

Playwright Process

Playwright Forrest Musselman talks about his process writing A Deep Poetic Journey Into Something. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

1. What was the originating idea for the play? Where did you start?

The idea for the play came from several different sources that ended up meshing into one. The first idea was a visual one, in which I kept thinking about a show that would play with shadows behind a scrim. The other ideas were a combination of songs. The first one was "Little Boxes" which was the theme song to the TV show Weeds. I kept thinking about the idea that we all live in boxes and how we can break out. The second song was "My Shadow" by the band Keane, which kept tying into the shadow play behind the scrims. I ended up using Keane's song to open the show.

2. What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

To be honest, there weren't a whole lot of challenges with this one. Once I had it all figured out in my head, the writing went very fast. Even when we started working the play, there weren't a whole lot of changes. I got lucky with this one.

3. As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play?

I really enjoyed moments with the shadow play, and I would love to see what other schools can come up with. It's such a unique opportunity to do something really fun and creative. Jane is my favorite character because of her attitude and dark sense of humor. I love that she's worried about breaking out of the box when she's out of it already. She's a very complex character and it's a great, challenging role for a good actress.

4. What is harder: coming up with ideas or rewrites?

Rewrites are always the hardest. It's very laborious, but very necessary to fine tune the play. It's most helpful to do it in a workshop environment with the actors, and a lot of the rewrites happen in the rehearsal process, often by

accident. A student might improvise a new line or react in a different way and suddenly that makes more sense than what was written.

5. What is your writing process like?

Well, I like to procrastinate as much as possible and find lots of excuses not to write. I constantly roll the idea around in my head and create scenes and dialogues and specific lines, etc. I usually don't sit down to write a show until I have a pretty good idea of the story line, but, of course, that often changes when I'm writing. The creative/writing process actually occurs for me when I'm writing. It's like something takes over and I just follow along. Once I sit down to write the show, it doesn't take very long to get through the first draft, and I write it in order from beginning to end. Then I trudge through the rewrites.

That being said, I've done lots of other processes as well. I've outlined, written back stories to the characters and monologues, written scenes out of order, and even worked through story lines with students. I guess each piece has a life of its own, and I have to figure out how to make it come alive.

6. What engages you about playwriting?

I like to put positivity into the world. I enjoy the creative process of each piece. I'm fortunate enough that I can take a play and workshop it with my students at school, so I get to see the entire process from idea to performance. At some point the play belongs to the students and they take it over. I have done commissions as well, so I don't see the play until it's performed, but I love to see what they've come up with. It's always fun for me, once the play is published, to see what each school or company has created. That's what's so fun about theater and the artistic process. Every show is different every time, and like one of the themes of *A Deep Poetic Journey Into Something*, it's the journey to the final product that we'll all remember.