

who are we,
who we are

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY
Forrest Musselman



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

who are we, who we are addresses anxiety and depression in teens and how they deal with it.

Background

The play premiered on January 11, 2020, at the WorkShape Festival in Rushford, Minnesota. It also competed in the Minnesota State High School League One-Act Play Competition receiving 1st in conference, 1st in subsection, and 1st in section 1A, and was a state participant at St. Catherine's college in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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

Clay is having issues because of his mother's failing health. At the beginning of the play he finds himself inside his own brain, where he meets other teens from his school who are also suffering. Nora is depressed over her father's suicide. Angel has an eating disorder, Mary is addicted to social media, Wanda has anxiety, anxiety, and more anxiety. Clay sees what others are going through — everyone has their reasons for words and worries whirling in their brains. Clay learns to listen and ask for help as the first step on his road to recovery.

Characters

ANNIE: SHE's dealing with depression and is Clay's best friend.

CLAY: HE's got some issues because of his mother's failing health.

NORA: SHE is dealing with her father's suicide.

ANGEL: SHE has an eating disorder.

MARY: SHE's addicted to social media.

MOLLY: SHE's depressed and can't find the right medication.

WANDA: SHE worries too much.

MISSY: SHE has anxiety due to bullying.

BRENDA: SHE has OCD.

SOPHIE: SHE's busy and worried about her grades.

BULLY: SHE's a bully.

ANNIE'S MOM: SHE's supportive and understanding.

NORA'S DAD: HE's a farmer and depressed.

MARY'S DAD: HE's a frustrated parent.

THERAPIST: SHE's a good listener.

WANDA'S MOM: SHE's a good hugger.

GIRL: SHE's in her brain.

Themes

Anxiety, Depression, Self-care, Identity

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What makes you anxious?
- ★ Do you know what makes your friends anxious?

- ★ What do you do to help your anxiety?
- ★ Have you ever asked for help to deal with anxiety?
- ★ Have you ever helped a friend deal with anxiety?
- ★ Do you talk to your friends about depression? Why or why not?
- ★ How can inner anxiety be outwardly expressed in a play?
- ★ What causes anxiety? What causes depression?

Pre-Read Activities

Inside/Outside Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss how they behave in public situations and how they see themselves “inside their brains.” So this is more than how they act “in private.” Is their brain a peaceful place? Is it full of anxiety? What are the similarities in their behaviour between inside and outside? What are the differences?
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau that explores three states:
 - » Outside: How do they behave in public situations?
 - » Inside: How do they see themselves from the inside?
 - » Choice: For the third tableau, students will choose either inside or outside. Which is their preferred state?
- ★ 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 the similarities and differences in that third picture. What do students choose?

Anxiety/Depression Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute scene in which Anxiety or Depression appears as a character.
 - » How will this character appear to others? How will they interact?
 - » What does this character look like? How do they behave?
 - » What's the conflict in the scene?
 - » Who will win in the end?

Anxiety Monologue

- ★ Have students reflect on what it would be like to be free of anxiety. What would that look like? Sound like? Feel like? Have students turn these thoughts into a monologue in which they write for a character who is anxiety free.

Anxiety/Depression Character Profile

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a character profile of either Anxiety or Depression. Come up with the following details for the character:
 - » Name
 - » Three physical traits
 - » Three personality traits
 - » A favourite outfit, which includes their favourite colour
 - » Favourite/least favourite food, movie, music
 - » Pet peeve
 - » Secret
 - » Motto
 - » Living environment

Inside/Outside Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into pairs. Each pair will create a one-minute conversation between the character and their brain.
- ★ Put the character into a situation where they are planning to do something (e.g., getting ready to go to the movies with friends). How will the brain talk to the character about this situation? Is the brain supportive or combative? Does the character fight their brain or give in?
- ★ At the end of the scene, decide who wins. Does the character follow through with the situation, or do they decide not to do it based on what the brain has said?

Research Project

- ★ In small groups students will research aspects of Anxiety and/or Depression.
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

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 *who are we, who we are*, 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. What is Missy's first line?
3. How does Clay respond to Molly when she says, "Unless you get some help"?
4. Why does Mary say she needs her phone?
5. How does Wanda's mother respond when she says she's "freaking out" over a paper?
6. What time does Sophie's alarm go off in the morning?
7. Why does Brenda keep turning her plate?
8. What game does Clay say is amazing?
9. Who finds Clay's bucket list?
10. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why does the playwright choose lower case letters for the title?
2. Analyze Clay'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?

3. Based on the way that Annie speaks, how would you visualize her? What is her physicality?
4. In the Production Notes the playwright states that “the actors wear basic white clothing, which is rather loose in design. It should be reminiscent of institutional clothing, but also almost cultish or something out of a Greek tragedy.” In your opinion, why did the playwright make this choice?
5. After reading the play, how would you costume the actors? Would you choose a uniform look or an individual look? Cite the text to support your answer.
6. Compare and contrast the way the characters sound when they are “in their brains” to when they are “out of their brains.”
7. What is the significance of the line, “We walk around all day in school but really we’re in our brains”?
8. What is the significance of the line, “Nights tend to be a little rough, thinking about... things”?
9. Why is it significant that Annie says, “Maybe it’s not the same story, but it hurts the same and I survived it”?
10. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *who are we, who we are*?
2. In your opinion, why does the play not solve Clay’s issues? Why does it only show the first step?
3. What is the playwright trying to say about dealing with anxiety/depression? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is the playwright trying to say about asking for help? Cite the text to support your answer.
5. In your opinion, what is going to happen next for Clay? What is going to happen next for Annie?

6. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with dealing with anxiety/depression with what happens in the play.
7. How does the author 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 how you present yourself in public?
- ★ Did any scene make you think about how you deal with your “brain”?
- ★ Would you end the play differently? Why or why not?
- ★ If Depression was a character, what would it look like? Behave like?
- ★ If Anxiety was a character, what would it look like? Behave like?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design a specific 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.

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?

“Our Brain” Ensemble Scene

- ★ At the beginning of the play the ensemble has the following text:
 - » This is the place we remain. Our brain. Our brain.
This is the place we go insane. Our brain. Our brain.
This is the place we remain. Our brain. Our brain.
The worst fears. The worst pain. The worst ideas.
It keeps churning and turning and burning in our brain.
It keeps churning and turning and burning in our brain.
Can't get out of it no matter how hard we try.
It keeps churning and turning and burning in our brain.
- ★ Using this text as a jumping off point, students in groups will explore their own struggles with being inside their brain.
- ★ Connect the moments that the groups create by having everyone repeat the line, “This is the place we remain. Our brain. Our brain.”

Help Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss how they ask for help. They will then create a three-series tableau in which groups will show:
 - » Students struggling in a variety of ways.
 - » Students making choices — do they ask for help or do they deny they need help?

- » The result of this choice.
- ★ 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.

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?

Playwright Process

Playwright Forrest Musselman talks about his process writing who are we, who we are. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

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

The play is based off of a real story that happened to a student of mine. His mother was dying of brain cancer over a period of several years, and he was not taking it well at all. After she passed away, he slowly started getting better and I asked him if I could base a play off his story. He agreed and it started from there. He was even brave enough to play himself in the show! I started thinking about other forms of anxiety and depression and what they stem from and it took off from there.

I also wanted to reinvent the acting cube, which all of us use in rehearsals or even performances. I wondered if lighting them could help add to a story and fortunately I have a really clever tech guy that was able to create them for me.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

The initial draft was way off from the final version. I initially wanted the story to be told by Annie and how she helps others take the first step. I workshopped it with my playwriting group and it didn't go over very well. So I switched gears and created more of an ensemble piece with Clay as the main character. It went pretty quickly after that. The challenges after that was just making sure it was realistic and that the situations were topical and made sense.

What changes, if any, were made during rehearsals?

Quite a bit actually. We talked about each scene and every sentence and whether it sounded natural and realistic. We kept cutting and snipping away words until we found the bare essence of each scene. This helped contrast against Clay's erratic, rambling monologues. We experimented a lot with how the ensemble would move and that helped separate the scenes.

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

The hug. It was the first scene I wrote for the show and I was crying when I finished writing it. It was the only part of the show that remained pretty much unchanged throughout all the rewriting and rehearsals. The scene got stronger and stronger as the actors really brought out all the emotion before the hug, so that it finally became the ultimate release. During performances, there was always lots of sniffing in the audience at that point. And lots of silence after the show was over as the audience just sat there and let it process.

What was it like seeing the play performed?

It's always a very unnerving experience to start because you never know how it's going to play to audiences. Once all my insecurities were taken care of, I just allowed myself to get lost in the story. This play was especially gratifying because it was therapeutic for my cast and crew, and we got to share this healing story with as many people we could reach. And now it's reaching further. Anxiety and depression in teens is rising and we need to address it as much as possible.