Lincoln’s Love of Language

Introductory Comments:
When visiting the Lincoln Cottage in the drawing room one finds out that aide, John Hay remarked that Lincoln “read Shakespeare more than all other writers together.” “In August 1863, Hay wrote: “Last night we went to the [Naval] Observatory...The President, took a look at the moon and Arcturus. I went with him to the Soldier’s Home, and he read Shakespeare to me, the end of Henry the VI and the beginning of Richard III until my heavy eye-lids caught his considerable notice, and he sent me to bed.” As modern readers we can conjecture that the content absorbed Lincoln as the plays essentially explore the perils awaiting a nation caught up in civil war. The fact that Lincoln loved the language, Shakespeare’s elegant eloquence as well as the storyline leads the way to this lesson. Further, Lincoln took solace at the Cottage, with Shakespeare’s words as important companions for comfort, meanwhile watching as thousands were buried literally near his front step.

Overview-
Students will explore Lincoln’s understanding of using the spoken language effectively, his sense of timing, his sense of importance, intonation, and silence.

Materials:
Three soliloquies from Shakespearean plays
1. Richard III – Opening soliloquy
2. Hamlet Act III, Scene III, Claudius’ soliloquy
3. Macbeth Act III, Scene II – Lady Macbeth and Macbeth

Essential Question: Why did the works of Shakespeare resonate so well with Lincoln? Was it because of the beauty of the language which Lincoln knew so well how to deliver? Or was it because Lincoln intuited the tragedies of Shakespeare as they would play out in his own life as an extraordinary person? We know hours of time at Lincoln Cottage were spent reading and reciting Shakespearean plays.

Background Information:
“We know from Francis Carpenter, who spent six weeks in the White House to make studies for his famous painting of Lincoln reading the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet, that once when bored with posing, Lincoln recited—no, enacted—the opening soliloquy from Richard III "with a degree of force and power that made it seem like a new creation." Carpenter told him he had never heard it better performed, and that Lincoln could have had a career on stage. Lincoln dismissed that idea, but then launched a detailed analysis about how most actors he’d seen go wrong in the speech, declaiming it as a triumphant set piece and not gauging the ambition and complex...
bitterness of Richard's mood at that moment, as he feels himself still far from power.” Stephen Dickey, senior lecturer at UCLA, 2006, “Shakespeare in American Life”
http://www.shakespeareinamericanlife.org

Procedure:
1. Hand out copies of the soliloquy.
2. Discuss Richard’s larger issue, as the younger brother to King Edward, Richard wants the throne. So the piece should reveal his ambition and his bitterness. But how does one do that?
3. Discuss the tools of oral interpretation: use of silence, emphasis on certain words, rising intonation, falling intonation, facial expression, use of gesture.
4. Students should work in pairs simply to decide what the timing should be. Where are the pauses? What words should be emphasized. Let them mark up the paper.
5. What is Richard’s complaint? How does he feel about his lot in life?
6. Have them write modern translations of what he is actually saying?
7. Introduce the idea of “subtext” or that which is not overtly stated but yet conveyed.
8. Remember, he has to indicate that he is thinking as he is speaking.
9. Will there be an overt change of demeanor before the lines to Clarence are spoken?
10. Using the background information from Dickey it is clear that Lincoln is a speaker and knows the art of speaking well. Allow the students to share insights into their opinions of Lincoln and his speaking. Only an accomplished orator would devote time to the speaking of these lines – as much time as an actor would spend.
11. Ask the students to consider how this gift of speaking well can aid a politician. Do they know of politicians who failed because they could not use the language effectively?
Text from Richard III

GLOUCESTER
Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
Grim-visaged war hath smooth'd his wrinkled front;
And now, instead of mounting barded steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.
But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity:
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams,
To set my brother Clarence and the king
In deadly hate the one against the other:
And if King Edward be as true and just
As I am subtle, false and treacherous,
This day should Clarence closely be mew'd up,
About a prophecy, which says that 'G'
Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be.
Dive, thoughts, down to my soul: here
Clarence comes.

Enter CLARENCE, guarded, and BRAKENBURY

Brother, good day; what means this armed guard
That waits upon your grace?
Background Information:  Lincoln and Shakespeare - Hamlet
In a later letter to James Hackett, the actor, Lincoln stated more fully than anywhere else his opinions about Shakespeare:

Some of Shakespeare's plays I have never read; while others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are Lear, Richard Third, Henry Eighth, Hamlet, and especially Macbeth. I think nothing equals Macbeth. It is wonderful. Unlike you gentlemen of the profession, I think the soliloquy in Hamlet commencing "O, my offense is rank" surpasses that commencing "To be or not to be." But pardon this small attempt at criticism.
The most intriguing revelation in this letter, for many, is Lincoln's attraction to Claudius's soliloquy, and this joins a body of evidence that biographers have found useful in considering Lincoln's career and ambition. Claudius, after all, achieves power by a literal act of fratricide, and here comes to acknowledge his ineradicable guilt. All the while, of course, a potential assassin, Hamlet, hovers behind him. The analogies with Lincoln's own situation—presiding in this case over a national fratricide, agonizing daily over the death toll, and notoriously (perhaps even suicidally) heedless of his own personal safety despite being stalked by various likely assassins—are too obvious to miss. Indeed, we would do well, I think, not to congratulate ourselves over discovering something secret here, but rather to assume that Lincoln himself perceived such analogies as clearly as anyone (Dickey, Shakespeare in American Life)

Procedure:
1. Give the students each copies of the Claudius soliloquy from Hamlet.
2. As you read this soliloquy reflect on the events of the war and Lincoln’s position.
3. Explain what fratricide actually means and ask if there is a connection to the war at hand.
4. Using the text of the letter offered in Background by Dickey create three lists of Claudius’ condition, Hamlet’s condition, and Lincoln’s condition.
5. The essential question remains did Lincoln find this soliloquy compelling because it resonated with his condition?
Hamlet

Act 3 Scene 3: Oh my offence is rank, it smells to heaven (Spoken by Claudius)

O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven; □ It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, □ A brother's murder. Pray can I not, □ Though inclination be as sharp as will: □ My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent; □ And, like a man to double business bound, □ I stand in pause where I shall first begin, □ And both neglect. What if this cursed hand □ Were thicker than itself with brother's blood, □ Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens □ To wash it white as snow? Where to serves mercy □ But to confront the visage of offence? □ And what's in prayer but this two-fold force, □ To be forestalled ere we come to fall, □ Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up; □ My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer □ Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'? □ That cannot be; since I am still possess'd □ Of those effects for which I did the murder, □ My crown, mine own ambition and my queen. □ May one be pardon'd and retain the offence? □ In the corrupted currents of this world □ Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice, □ And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself □ Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above; □ There is no shuffling, there the action lies □ In his true nature; and we ourselves compell'd, □ Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults, □ To give in evidence. What then? what rests? □ Try what repentance can: what can it not? □ Yet what can it when one can not repent? □ O wretched state! O bosom black as death! □ O limed soul, that, struggling to be free, □ Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay! □ Bow, stubborn knees; and, heart with strings of steel, □ Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe! □ All may be well.
Background Information:

On April 9, the same day as Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox, Lincoln was traveling by boat back from Richmond to Washington with his family, some members of congress, and a visiting Frenchman, the Marquis de Chambrun, who gives the following account:

As we were steaming up the Potomac, that whole day the conversation dwelt upon literary subjects. Mr. Lincoln read to us for several hours passages taken from Shakespeare. Most of these were from Macbeth, and, in particular, the verses which follow Duncan's assassination. I cannot recall this reading without being awed at the remembrance, when Macbeth becomes king after the murder of Duncan, he falls a prey to the most horrible torments of mind. Either because he was struck by the weird beauty of these verses, or from a vague presentiment coming over him, Mr. Lincoln paused here while reading, and began to explain to us how true a description of the murderer that one was; when, the dark deed achieved, its tortured perpetrator came to envy the sleep of his victim. And he read over again the same scene. (Dickey, Shakespeare in American Life)

Procedure:

1. Read the Marquis de Chambrun’s account out loud and give the students the context.
2. The primary goal is to examine the reasons behind Lincoln’s pause and explanation.
3. Take time in the discussion to explore all the types of death Lincoln endured during his life, not all murders.
4. What ambiguity did Lincoln have to embrace daily during this War?
5. Focus on the envy and, in effect, safety of the dead.
6. In literature certainly parallels can be drawn to Frankenstein by Mary Shelley and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Coleridge
7. “Weird beauty of these phrases” – what does that mean. Here you can return to Lincoln’s appreciation of language itself, phrasing, images, and timing.
8. Ask the students to read the exchange out loud at least twice, experimenting with how each line could be delivered.
9. Ask the students to divide a page into two columns. The text of the play will be in one column and what is going on in Lincoln’s mind – or could be going on in Lincoln’s mind will be on the right.
10. Take time to share the papers.
LADY MACBETH  Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content:
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.
[Enter MACBETH]
How now, my lord! why do you keep alone,
Of sorriest fancies your companions making,
Using those thoughts which should indeed have died
With them they think on? Things without all remedy
Should be without regard: what's done is done.

MACBETH  We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it:
She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.
But let the frame of things disjoint, both the
worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly: better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
Can touch him further.

LADY MACBETH  Come on;
Gentle my lord, sleek o'er your rugged looks;
Be bright and jovial among your guests to-night.

MACBETH  So shall I, love; and so, I pray, be you:
Let your remembrance apply to Banquo;
Present him eminence, both with eye and tongue:
Unsafe the while, that we
Must lave our honours in these flattering streams,
And make our faces vizards to our hearts,
Disguising what they are.

LADY MACBETH  You must leave this.
MACBETH  O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!
Thou know'st that Banquo, and his Fleance, lives.

LADY MACBETH  But in them nature's copy's not eterne.
MACBETH  There's comfort yet; they are assailable; 
Then be thou jocund: ere the bat hath flown 
His cloister'd flight, ere to black Hecate's summons 
The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums 
Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done 
A deed of dreadful note.

LADY MACBETH  What's to be done?

MACBETH  Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, 
Till thou applaud the deed. Come, seeling night, 
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day; 
And with thy bloody and invisible hand 
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond 
Which keeps me pale! Light thickens; and the crow 
Makes wing to the rooky wood: 
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse; 
While night's black agents to their preys do rouse. 
Thou marvell'st at my words: but hold thee still; 
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill. 
So, prithee, go with me.

That Lincoln would focus on this passage from *Macbeth* 3.2 at this precise moment in American history, and in his own life, five days from death, is deeply suggestive.
Summary –

These three experiences with Shakespeare offer students a deeply personal introduction to the workings of Lincoln’s mind both in how stories resonate within us and how we use the language, the spoken word is a powerful tool.

As an optional final experience the students could now move into a study of the Gettysburg Address for it’s imagery, its timing, and its Shakespearean influences.