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## Trading Spaces with Tom Walker: Moving the Devil Out of Fourth Hour

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*“How stupid! Nobody would ever make a trade like that!”*

In our many years of teaching “The Devil and Tom Walker” by Washington Irving, this was the kind of response we had come to expect from our students. The story is required reading for sophomores at Hudsonville High School, where Jen teaches full-time and where Brian, a professor at Grand Valley, team-taught with Jen as part of a sabbatical project. In previous years, try as we might to engage our “regular” sophomore students in a discussion of Tom Walker’s fateful, Faustian trade (offering his eternal soul to the devil in return for earthly riches and temporal success), our students had tended to be disinterested at best. “What a stupid story” was a refrain we had heard frequently; “No one would make such a dumb trade!”

There were times when we were glad enough to hear even responses like those, because at least they signified that the students had understood the story at some level. As anyone who has tried to teach “Tom Walker” knows, many students find Irving’s prose rather daunting. Here’s a sampling from an early portion of the text, where the narrator describes the bleak Walker home and the contentious relationship between Tom Walker and his wife:

They lived in a forlorn-looking house that stood alone and had an air of starvation. A few straggling savin-trees, emblems of sterility, grew near it. . . . A miserable horse, whose ribs were as articulate as the bars of a gridiron, stalked

about a field, where a thin carpet of moss, scarcely covering the ragged beds of pudding-stone, tantalized and balked his hunger; and sometimes he would lean his head over the fence, look piteously at the passer-by, and seem to petition deliverance from this land of famine.

The house and its inmates had altogether a bad name. Tom’s wife was a tall termagant, fierce of temper, loud of tongue, and strong of arm. Her voice was often heard in wordy warfare with her husband; and his face sometimes showed signs that their conflicts were not confined to words. No one ventured, however, to interfere between them. The lonely wayfarer shrank within himself at the horrid clamor and clapper-clawing; eyed the den of discord askance; and hurried on his way, rejoicing, if a bachelor, in his celibacy.

Most of our students were put off by Irving’s use of unfamiliar words (“clapper-clawing”), words whose meanings have evolved since the story was written (“gridiron,” “balked”), and particularly long sentences and convoluted syntax. Of course, a few of our students read these lines and the entire story with perfect understanding—but when they finished, they still thought the story was stupid because “nobody would ever make a trade like that.”

In our team-teaching situation, we wanted to see if we could change that outcome somehow, encouraging more kids to read, understand, and appreciate the story. About two days before “Tom Walker” was scheduled to make his appearance in our tenth-grade classroom, we began to think of ways to help kids see that making trades is part of living and that they themselves make certain trades every day in order to get what they want. Because the culture and language of the story are so different from what the kids are used to, we felt that prereading preparation might be key to the students’ understanding (Haberling & White, 2004; Kahn, Walter, & Johannessen, 1984; Smagorinsky, McCann, & Kern, 1987; White, 2004). As Hamann,

Schultz, Smith, and White (1991) found, writing about relevant personal experience prior to reading can help kids to fight through difficult prose and to make connections between their own lives and the world of a culturally distant story. After all, Tom Walker makes a whopper of an unwise trade, but he's not the only one who has ever "sold out" his long-term priorities for short-term gain. We thought that if our students could think and write about the trades they make in their own lives, prior to reading the story, they just might relate more easily to Walker's trade. But because so many of our previous students had either seemed unaware of the trades they were making or were convinced that their trades were nothing like Tom Walker's, we decided that just asking our present students to write about trades wouldn't work. Instead, we thought that we should give them some more immediate trading experience to consider before writing; so we devised the following game which builds on a strategy developed by Larry Johannessen (2001) and his colleagues (Kahn, Walter, & Johannessen, 1984). *The Trading Spaces Game: Connecting with Tom Walker and with Each Other*

Here's how it goes:

**Figure 1: Handout for The Trading Spaces Game**

- New Stereo System
- Vacation
- Friends
- Car or Truck of Choice
- New House
- Job I Enjoy
- High School Diploma
- Family
- Money
- Sense of Humor
- Popularity or Fame
- Good Looks
- Talent (musical, athletic, artistic, etc.)
- Happiness
- Independence
- Others

1. We cut the handout which appears in Figure 1 into squares (card stock) and give each student an envelope containing one of each square. We explain that each square represents a priority, something we value more or less than other things.
2. When students receive their envelopes, they look over the cards, fill in the blank priorities, and then rank each card in order of importance in their lives. Students find this difficult, but with some encouragement they begin to rank rather quickly. We ask them to mark the cards from 1 to 20, with number 1 being their highest priority and number 20 being their lowest.
3. Once they have their cards in order, students should gather them into a single pile and get ready to move.
4. The next step is chaotic, but worth it. We place students in groups of four or five. Their goal in the groups is to negotiate with their classmates and to trade with them in order to get rid of their low priorities and to gain more of their high priorities. So, if one of my low priorities is "new wardrobe" and "friends" is my top priority, I might try to trade my "wardrobe" card for my classmate's "friends" card. The goal is to get as many top picks as possible. Students soon learn that trades are not always one-for-one; that is, a student could trade both a "wardrobe" card and a "stereo" card in order to gain a single "friends" card (or two "stereo" cards for two "friends" cards).
5. After 3 or 4 minutes in this first small group, we place the students in new groups for another round of trading.
6. After about 4 minutes, we announce that they will have one final group to trade with; we move them into new groups and start the timer again.
7. After the third round of trading, we ask the students to return to their seats and to tally their results. How many of their top picks were they able to get? The students who

have garnered the most #1 picks receive a prize (candy bars).

The first time we tried the game, we were amazed at the level of energy and the degree of seriousness which the students brought to the task, perhaps because of the competitive nature of the game. Like Tom Walker, they desired to accumulate as much as they could—they wanted more than any other classmate. Even though they didn't yet know it, they had already made a connection with their soon-to-be neighbor, Tom Walker.

They really enjoyed connecting with each other, too. Many of the students were disappointed when the trading time ended and asked for another round. In addition, we noticed that the game broke down cultural and socio-economic barriers in the classroom as students spoke with one another about what was truly important in their lives. We were especially pleased to see that Midori, an exchange student from Japan who was very self-conscious about her English, and Pablo, an exchange student from Mexico who had had some trouble fitting in with the other boys in the class, were suddenly being treated as equals and colleagues; their classmates were listening to them, asking them questions about what was important to them, and, of course, trying to get them to trade! It seemed that everyone was having fun, no one was excluded, and discussion of life's priorities was taking center stage.

Of course, because the game would have a winner, the students were clearly focused on winning the prize. So to ensure that their thinking went beyond the candy we had promised to the victors, we asked the students to respond in writing to the following prompt for homework:

*What types of trades did you make today which you would not make in real life?*

*Why did you make those trades today?*

*What types of trades did you make today that you would definitely make in real life? What might those trades tell you about your priorities?*

In class the next day, we shared our writing in small groups and discussed (in small groups and large) the kinds of choices people make in life to get what they want. The writing and discussion taught our class new things about one another, helped the students to see past some external differences to notice more significant areas of similarity and difference in terms of priorities, and gave us a helpful window into the lives of many of our students. In fact, some of our students found the experience to be life changing, a point to which we'll return in

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a moment. But first we want to show you how what kids write in response to the game can serve as excellent preparation for the story and for life.

#### **Tom Walker in a "Lower Level" Reading Class**

We were so pleased with how the Trading Spaces Game had worked in our 10<sup>th</sup> grade "regular" class that we shared the activity with our colleagues. Two of them, Jennifer DeYoung and Beth Palumbo, were especially interested because they also teach "Tom Walker"—but some of their students have been classified as "lower level readers." We all wanted to know if the Trading Spaces Game might help less successful readers to enjoy and understand such a difficult required story.

When Jennifer and Beth tried the game, their kids participated eagerly and negotiated earnestly. The students' post-game essays were particularly revealing. For example, Jennifer was pleased and surprised to see that Justin, who rarely completed his work and was struggling academically, had added "college education" to his list and made it his top priority. He wrote,

The types of choices I made today were good ones. Like for example I traded away “to have kids” for “to earn a college education” and “to have good friends” also for the same thing. I made that trade today because it is my number one priority [sic] right now. . . . The trades I made today in this game, I would definitely make the same in real life. Justin’s answer helped Jennifer to see his academic struggles in a new light and gave us all some insight regarding his hopes for the future.

Another student, Tamara, also helped us to understand her perspective a little better. Unlike Justin, college is not in doubt for Tamara; she is a straight A student in spite of her low reading scores. But Tamara surprised her teachers, many of her classmates, and perhaps even herself when she wrote about the priority of a college education (a priority she had also added to the list herself):

One trade I did make that I would make in real life was giving up a lot of money for kids. I also gave away my college education. Although having kids was not my top priority, it was still more important than being wealthy or going to college. These trades told me a lot about my priorities. I realized that cars, houses, clothes, and even college do not even come close to being polite, being honest, and even having kids.

Like Tamara, other students seemed to have been stimulated to some deeper reflection about their lives and values by the trading game. Some of Beth’s students found that the game both revealed and reinforced their priorities:

These trades tell me that most material things don’t matter to me, at least in my eyes, [although] I would not be surprised to see that these trades would be much harder in real life (Jenny).

These trades tell me that I don’t prioritize my life by how it would look to the outside world. It also tells me that I put my priorities

in order by the way that would make me happiest in the long run (Kari).

These trades tell me that I care more about people than about material items (Josh).

And other students found that the trading game revealed some inconsistencies on their part, causing them to search out their own priorities more carefully:

This tells me that I did not think carefully on the thing that I traded and I realized later that I should keep (Jane).

These trades tell me that I might just have to reexamine [sic] my life a little to see if it is what I think it is (Grant).

Of course, we were glad that the game stimulated both our “regular” and our “basic” students to examine (and reexamine) their own lives; but we were also hopeful that the game and our discussions would help and encourage the students to understand and examine Tom Walker and his trade. We were not disappointed. Whereas previous students had found the story to be incomprehensible and Tom Walker to be stupid, these students were much more willing and able to push through the difficult language and to focus on Tom’s priorities and his trade. Unlike previous classes, these students wanted to talk about the temptation Tom faced, what he was giving up, and why he was giving in. They related Tom’s predicament to their own experiences with life’s priorities (cf. Johannessen, 2001) and seemed to recognize that, although Tom’s trade was extreme, it was not so different from the trades many are tempted to make every day.

### **Long Term Learning (Even in Fourth Hour)**

As teachers, all of us already knew that this kind of prereading preparation can help students to understand and appreciate a difficult literary text. What surprised us was how the activity and subsequent discussion brought our classes closer together. For example, Jen and Brian’s fourth hour

“regular” class had been particularly challenging, a group of students who seemed to distrust and dislike each other. Large group discussions had been largely and uncomfortably silent; small group discussions had been impossible to manage; and certain students (like Midori and Pablo) had been completely ostracized. We found ourselves unable to crack the unspoken social barriers our students had erected. Thankfully, Tom Walker spoke to our students in a way we never imagined—and in a way we never could have. We were able to use this experience not just as a way to examine a difficult text, but also as a way to help our students connect to one another.

Just this spring, almost five years after our fourth hour meeting with “The Devil and Tom Walker,” one of our former students stopped by for a visit. Bob had struggled in the early weeks of our class and had wanted to drop, but we persuaded him to stick it out; he became one of our most reliable discussers, a ready participant in everything we asked him to do. What we didn’t know at the time was that our 4<sup>th</sup> hour “Tom Walker” experience had been the key to turning things around for Bob. During his recent visit, Bob told us that the Trading Spaces Game was one of his most memorable school experiences because it was through this activity that he learned he could “do English.” While the text was far above his usual reading level, Bob said that the game helped him to grasp the connections between the story and his life. In addition, Bob said that the trading experience helped him to see that his peers, usually separated into impenetrable, obstinate social cliques, were just like he was.

During our conversation, Bob reminded us that Rick was one of the students in our class with whom he was least likely to connect. He felt that Rick was a guy he simply could not talk to. During the game, however, Bob discovered that he and Rick actually had a lot in common. Bob told us that this really changed the way he saw Rick, but it also changed the way he saw himself and the rest of the class: suddenly, he knew that he belonged and that he could do it. Bob was happy and proud to report that he is now taking classes at a local community college and that he is part owner of a computer-

related business. He said that the success he’s enjoying now really started with the boost of self-confidence he got while playing the game and talking about “Tom Walker.” When Bob was our student, we observed his growth throughout the semester, but at the time we had no idea what had stimulated it. He went from silent withdrawal (or goofy acting out) to eager participation; he went from believing that he couldn’t “do English” to knowing that he could. Those are some trades.

Of course, not all of our students have been so profoundly moved by the game or the story. A few students still say that “Tom Walker” is stupid. But before we started using the Trading Spaces Game, that was the response of the majority. Now, in both “regular” and “basic” sophomore English, most of our students are much more willing to grapple with the language and the concepts of the story; and they are also much more willing to think and to talk with each other about what is truly important to them, what they would be willing to trade for, and what they would never trade away. Furthermore, most of our students now engage in post-reading writing about the story with greater interest and specificity (see Fig. 2 for a sample assignment). In short, we’ve found that the Trading Spaces Game is a good way to move the devil out of fourth hour.

**About the Authors:**

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## Figure 2: Literary Letter for “The Devil and Tom Walker”

*After a large group discussion of the story, we ask the students to “become” Tom Walker and to write a letter to the people of Boston. Then we ask the students to become another character and to reply to Tom’s letter. Here are the instructions.*

**Directions for Literary Letter:** We’re going to do some writing in our journals. Here’s the focus of our writing. Just before killing Tom, the devil grants Tom one last request. Tom’s request is that he be allowed to write a letter to the people of the town. Take the next few minutes to write a letter from Tom to the people of Boston. The letter will be published in Boston’s newspaper. What do you think Tom would most want to say to the people of Boston about himself, his experiences, about them and their lives? What advice might he give? What parting words might he share? (We’ll be trading these letters with partners in just a few minutes).

**Directions for Response to Literary Letter:** Trade with a partner. Read the letter. First, write your name in your partner’s journal. Now write a rebuttal from the devil, also to be published in the newspaper. How would the devil respond? What would he want to say to the people of Boston in response to Tom’s letter? (Alternative: Write a letter from Tom’s wife responding to Tom’s letter.)

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