



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
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Hamlet and Hollywood: Using Film Adaptation to Analyze Ophelia and Gertrude

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After teaching English literature to high school students for ten years I have realized that film adaptations of literature can make an incredible difference to a student's basic comprehension of literature and aid in his/her analysis. However, I also realize that adaptations create a specific interpretation of a text. The students come to see this adaptation as the definitive interpretation of a piece of writing. I have had trouble helping students see that a director is doing the same thing as a reader of a text. The director is interpreting the text and transforming that text into a visual form. Students do this naturally. They have been programmed by modern society to think in pictures and sound bites. They are bombarded by sensory stimuli. I have noticed that students discuss literature in visual terms, and they respond well to visual writers. Therefore, I see the need for a unit that engages students while teaching them that film is a powerful interpretive tool, one that offers an interpretation, but not necessarily a definitive one.

With these things in mind I decided to create a unit which uses various interpretations of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to initiate the students into film analysis as well as aid their analysis of a staged text. Specifically this unit asks students to examine clips from Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet* (1964), Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990), and Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000). These directors have adapted Shakespeare's work in three distinctly different ways that allow for a myriad of discussion opportunities, but my unit will focus our analysis on the opening scenes of the films and the portrayal of Ophelia and Gertrude within the films. I believe discussion of the adaptations will lead to interesting interpretations of the text as well as a new found way to examine film and Shakespeare.

(Developed for AP English IV, grade 12; recommended for English, grade 12)

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