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Hamlet and Hollywood: Using Film Adaptation to Analyze Ophelia and Gertrude

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Rationale

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. This effect of film on my students is alternately aggravating and invigorating. There is power in film. Film can move and sway an audience, especially modern ones, to believe or see certain things in ways that can not be duplicated by a printed text. The problem I have had is in 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 to visual writers like Steinbeck and cinematic writers like Hemingway vigorously. 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. Each director creates a unique vision of the play, and the actresses have different approaches to the characters. 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.

My unit will first examine the opening scenes of the movies. The opening scene of a movie is incredibly important to understanding the rest of the film. It is through the opening scene that the director shares his/her vision and gives us the keys to unlock the rest of the film. Therefore, it will be important for the students to view and discuss these opening scenes in order to properly analyze Gertrude and Ophelia in the play. In

addition, William Shakespeare wrote a very powerful opening scene that sets up the mood and theme of the entire play. However, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli, and Almereyda all chose to reject the opening scene by Shakespeare and create an entirely new scene. This raises interesting questions about adaptation and ownership. Therefore it will be vital for us to examine the opening scenes to truly understand what the directors are trying to do with their version of *Hamlet*.

Female characters in William Shakespeare's plays are fascinating. Although the plays are dominated by male protagonists, the female ones seem to create more discussion in a classroom. My AP English class is made up of mostly female students, and I like to find ways to engage them in the male dominated literature of the course. We read very few works by women writers, and most of the protagonists in the pieces we read are male. Focusing on Ophelia and Gertrude may encourage alternative analysis of the play and a different approach to viewing the films. Furthermore, after viewing many versions of *Hamlet* I became intrigued by the different portrayals of Ophelia and Gertrude. So one of the things I hope to do with my students is have them focus on the effect of these women on the film, beginning with the opening sequence of the movie.

Finally, this unit is designed for my AP English Literature course. While the AP literature course does not require that students have knowledge of film analysis, I have found that most of the pieces within the curriculum have movie counterparts. The students enjoy viewing clips of these movies, and these viewings generally spark much discussion. However, as an English teacher I have never felt confident in my ability to teach film analysis properly. When the opportunity arose to take a seminar with Dudley Andrew at Yale University on adapting literature to film I thought it would be the perfect way to gain knowledge about film analysis. The way one examines and identifies motifs, themes, setting, characterization etc. in films is similar to the actions one goes through to analyze a piece of literature. While I almost always prefer a written text to its film counterpart, I feel that it is necessary to educate myself and my students about film adaptations. Whether I like it or not, film adaptations exist. Students also love watching movies. Therefore, I want to create a unit that utilizes film adaptations effectively.

Background

The Opening Scene

William Shakespeare created a fascinating opening scene in *Hamlet*. It sets a clear mood and foreshadows what is to come. He creates tension with the first line, "Who's there?" from Bernardo as he stands watch on top of Elsinore castle. Francisco replies by demanding that Bernardo reveal *his* identity. Bernardo's reply, "Long live the King!" is brilliant in its simplicity and it resonates meaning. As we learn just a bit later there is something amuck with the King of Denmark. Exactly who should live long? The King whose ghost is walking the castle, Hamlet, the rightful heir to the throne, or Claudius, the murderer and usurper to the throne? Shakespeare builds off the mood and weighty meaning created by these few short lines in the rest of the scene. In it the audience learns that something is very wrong in Denmark. The dead King is walking the castle and Prince Fortinbras of Norway is attempting to wage war against Denmark. Shakespeare even has Horatio make reference to Julius Caesar's murder and the horrible things that appeared after that.

The brilliance of this opening scene is unquestioned. As an English teacher I have found that it hooks my students instantly. After reading the first few lines they always want to know why Bernardo and Francisco are

so afraid while patrolling the top of a castle. Who exactly do they expect to encounter up there? The ghost is extremely attractive because they know whenever there is a ghost there is sure to be trouble. The hint of war excites them because students always enjoy a bloody scene or two. Finally, the reference to Julius Caesar engages them because they read the play in tenth grade and always like to see references to things they know. This scene does much more than just grab the attention of my students and encourage them to read, it is also a wonderful mechanism for teaching the structure of a story or play. Directly after reading it we discuss what Shakespeare is trying to convey with this first scene. After each act I return to this scene to see if the students find any more significance once they have more information. By doing this the students learn to unravel the depth of meaning in the language, and they begin doing this to the other scenes on their own.

So if Shakespeare created such a powerful opening scene why do so many directors who transfer the play to film delete this scene? I am unsure myself, so I think it would be interesting to explore this issue with my students. The three film versions of the play I chose for this unit all reject the opening scene written by Shakespeare. The scenes that have replaced the original are unique and brief. No scene is much more than five minutes in length. These short, yet distinct scenes are a way to enter into deep film analysis with your students. Throughout the year I will show many film clips of books, and through these clips I will teach my students the language of film analysis. My hope is that by the time we get to our work with *Hamlet* my students will not be stunted in their ability to analyze film by their lack of film vocabulary. Additionally, each scene is short enough to work within the length of a few class periods and enable me to show a clip several times if necessary. Finally, these scenes segue naturally to a discussion of the female characters of the play, which is another focus of my unit.

Kozintsev's Opening

Grigori Kozintsev created his *Hamlet* film in a post World War II and post Stalin era of the former Soviet Union, and his experiences in Russia are evident in the isolated and prison-like elements of the film. He first worked with *Hamlet* on the stage in 1941, as the Germans attacked Russia, before moving the play to the screen in 1964. His film is the most visually stunning of the three due to its use of heavy, earthy images and his decision to shoot it in black and white. This is my favorite of the three films. When I first viewed it I had an immediate visceral reaction to the powerful sounds and images Kozintsev brings to the screen. I felt it was an important film to use in my classroom because Kozintsev, more than any other director, uses all the registers of the film medium to create his version. I felt that my students would respond to this film despite the fact that it is black and white and subtitled because Kozintsev creates an intense emotional reaction in the viewer.

The opening scene of the film is the most overtly dramatic of the versions I have chosen. As well as creating a sense of what the rest of the film will bring, it sets up most of the elements necessary in a Shakespeare tragedy from a literary perspective. It begins with the image of a rough sea shot from the top of a high cliff, slow church bells sound in the background. The view switches to a shot of a stone wall with a flaming wall sconce for the title sequence while the church bells continue. Suddenly, loud operatic music begins as black flags are dropped from windows, archways, and turrets. A long shot shows two riders on horses barreling toward the castle. The men jump from their horses and race up stone steps. There is an extended shot of a heavy wooden drawbridge slowly closing as the imposing iron portcullis shuts. This switches to a shot of Gertrude, dressed in flowing black, running to Hamlet as he rushes towards her. A towering black cloth unfurls from the high ceiling behind them and they embrace. We see Gertrude's face as she sobs in her son's embrace; Hamlet's face is concealed from our view. Claudius, however, is seen looming in the upper left hand corner of the screen observing the moment between son and mother.

Within this brief scene Kozintsev gives us a wealth of information in his break from the original opening scene. First, he sets up the visual metaphors of his film with his shots of stone, fire, water, iron, and earth. These recurring motifs are a good way to help students think about what Kozintsev is trying to get across to his audience. Students are used to metaphors playing a role of great importance in literature, so the use of visual metaphors here should be easy for them to grasp. Kozintsev has actually explained what the visual images in his film represent:

Stone: the walls of Elsinore, the firmly built government prison

Iron: weapons, the inhuman forces of oppression, the ugly steel faces of war

Fire: anxiety, revolt, movement; raging fiery tongues

Sea: waves, crashing against the bastions, ceaseless movement, the change of the tides, the boiling of chaos . . . the silent endless surface of glass

Earth : the world beyond Elsinore, amid stones—a bit of field tilled by a ploughman, the sand pouring out of Yorick's skull, and the handful of dust in the palm of the wanderer-heir to the throne of Denmark. (qtd. in Hindle)

The meaning that Kozintsev has applied to his visual metaphors shows a deep connection to the life he had in Russia. Showing the connection between the film and the director's life will give your students another route for analysis of the film. This will also begin to help students decide why Kozintsev rejects the opening scene that Shakespeare wrote for a scene of his own creation. Once the students begin examining the visual metaphors above, as well as the other elements of the opening scene, this should lead to ideas about what this opening scene gives to the film that Kozintsev believed Shakespeare's words could not.

In addition to setting up the interesting images/themes of the rest of the film the opening scene sets up a way to discuss the role of women in the film. Gertrude is one of the first people we see clearly. In fact, Kozintsev chooses to show Gertrude's grief while obscuring Hamlet's. His opening scene is all about Gertrude's loss and the reaction to that loss by others. Hamlet is first shown in a long shot, riding toward the castle. This long shot effectively separates him from the audience, and when Kozintsev does allow us a closer look at Hamlet, it is of his back. This could be a way to begin bringing out the isolation of the protagonist that is one of the defining elements of a Shakespearean tragedy. Kozintsev's Hamlet is "alienated from the audience in long shots" (Hatchuel 54). Additionally, if we are examining the women in the play, our lack of intimacy with Hamlet is a way to show us the tension created by Gertrude's relationships with men in the play. In the final shot of the opening scene everyone is reacting to Gertrude. Hamlet is embracing her, Claudius is watching her, and her grieving face is the focus of our attention as well. When considering the text of Shakespeare's play, there is much to demonstrate that the dead King, Claudius, and Hamlet all struggle with their love for this woman. Within Shakespeare's text all of the men acquiesce to her demands and do not hold her responsible for her actions. The ghost orders Hamlet "nor let they soul contrive against thy mother aught" (I.iv). Claudius creates an elaborate plan to kill Hamlet rather than just punishing him outright after the murder of Polonius because "the Queen his mother / lives almost by his looks" (IV, vii). Hamlet, while clearly upset with his mother's betrayal of his father's memory, only confronts her once in the entire play. By making Gertrude's grief the culmination of the opening scene Kozintsev is highlighting the strange dynamics of Gertrude's relationship with the men in the play.

Zeffirelli's Opening

Franco Zeffirelli's version of *Hamlet* starring Mel Gibson is very popular, but until recently it has been widely ignored by film critics. This is the version of the play I usually show to my students, and they enjoy it

tremendously due to Gibson's energetic performance. Zeffirelli, like Kozintsev, creates a scene which occurs prior to the opening of the play. While Kozintsev shows us Hamlet arriving home upon hearing the news of his father's death, Zeffirelli shows us the dead King's funeral.

The film begins with a long shot of Elsinore castle high on a cliff above a sea. The setting is almost what one would expect for the film. A cliff side castle among rolling hills of green. However, in the opening Zeffirelli films the castle in blue black while the opening credits flash across the screen. Zeffirelli chooses to use soft, vaguely haunting music in the background. After the credits are finished there is a series of continuous shots of men in armor and subjects in full dress standing in a courtyard staring up at the castle. All of their faces are flat, expressionless. As the scene changes we hear a woman sobbing, and the funeral comes into view. This is a dark crypt, giving the impression of being deep in the ground under the castle. Gertrude is the first person we see. She is crying as she stands over her husband's body in the stone crypt. She pulls a metal comb from her hair in the shape of a flower and places it in her husband's hands. Shots of a somber Claudius are interspersed. The shot changes to a hand reaching out and grabbing a fistful of dirt. The camera follows the hand as it moves over the body of the King and sprinkles the dirt on the body. The camera slowly pans up the arm to reveal Hamlet in a hooded robe. Claudius says, "Let the world take note / You are the most immediate to our throne, / And with no less nobility of love / Than that which dearest father bears his son / Do I impart towards you." These lines are taken from Act I, scene ii of the play. Hamlet does not even look at Claudius when these lines are spoken. Instead, he turns to leave as the weighty stone covering is placed over the tomb of his father. Gertrude begins sobbing heavily and throws herself on the tomb, tears running down her face. She slowly lifts her head and looks across the tomb at Claudius. Her sobbing ceases as their eyes meet. There is a shot of Hamlet watching this exchange. Then the camera pulls away to show the scene from above as Hamlet exits.

Zeffirelli's opening scene is interesting in that it exhibits elements of the Shakespearean tragedy, but it primarily focuses on Gertrude. Zeffirelli shows Hamlet isolating himself by placing him in a hooded cloak and refusing to make eye contact with any other characters. This Hamlet is choosing isolation, while Kozintsev's Hamlet is placed in isolation by the way he is shot. Another interesting thing that Zeffirelli does in this scene is use lines from scene two to speak about Hamlet inheriting the throne. While Hamlet ignores Claudius's statement, this brings up the interesting issue of why Hamlet is not crowned King later in the film. This calls our attention to an important element in Shakespearean tragedy, the Great Chain of Being. This idea states that there is a specific hierarchy in the world, and when this hierarchy is disrupted through unnatural events, things go bad, very bad. In this play the chain is clearly disrupted by Claudius's murder of his brother and subsequent theft of the throne. When Zeffirelli has Claudius speak these lines in the opening scene it calls attention to the disruption. It also sets up additional tension between Claudius and Hamlet. As a teacher I am happy to see Zeffirelli call attention to the throne issue in his opening scene. Many students miss this while reading the text because lines about this are embedded in long speeches or soliloquies.

Zeffirelli's opening scene also makes it easy to find a way to focus on the women in the play. Gertrude is center stage in this scene, and the audience gets a better view of her grief, fleeting as it is, than of Hamlet's. It is her sobs we hear first, her tears we see. In fact, throughout the first scene Zeffirelli continually turns the camera on Gertrude. "Our first close-up is of Close's Gertrude, whose pale, sobbing face is wreathed by thick blond braids" (Crowl 50). The braids frame Gertrude's face, focusing our attention on her visible grief. Samuel Crowl in his book *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, believes that this opening scene "establishes Zeffirelli's decision to focus on *Hamlet* as a family romance, to place Gertrude firmly at its center, to compete extravagantly with Olivier's oedipal version of the play" (51). This opening sets up the strange relationships that Gertrude has with Hamlet and Claudius in the rest of the film. If students examine this scene properly

they may see that a love triangle will appear within this film version of Shakespeare's play.

Almeryda's Opening

Michael Almeryda created his version of Shakespeare's play in a modern setting. I chose to use it because it is one of the few films of *Hamlet* that uses the modern setting and maintains some semblance of the original text. While Almeryda's film chops out much of the text and moves much of what remains around, his adaptation is clearly an adaptation and not a "film inspired" by Shakespeare as is the case with many other modern versions of Shakespeare plays. Almeryda's version will enable my students to see a modern twist still within the realm of adaptation.

Within his opening scene he takes full advantage of our modern society to give us an idea of the shape his adaptation will take as he rejects the opening scene that Shakespeare created. Almeryda begins with a continuous shot of New York at night filmed through the sunroof of a moving vehicle. Across this shot a textual summary is flashed to give the audience some context for what has come before this point. His summary ends with "The King's son, Hamlet, returns from school, suspecting foul

play . . ." The shot changes to someone walking through Times Square as pulsing music plays in the background. A highly reflective glass and metal building comes into view. The camera focuses on the flashing glass and metal revolving door at the entry way before sliding to the side to show us the words Hotel Elsinore in polished metal on the shiny building. The film abruptly switches to a shot of Hamlet on grainy black and white video mumbling lines "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth" from Act II, scene ii of the play. He pauses in his delivery to hold a glass of clear liquid in front of him. He looks through the glass into the camera before putting the glass down and continues delivering the lines from the speech from Act II. The lines are delivered in a low, rough voice and the audience must strain to hear them clearly. While he speaks the lines, seemingly random images appear on the screen. There is a skeleton of an animal, a shot of cave painting, a stealth fighter jet etc. The camera switches to a short shot of Hamlet off of the black and white screen. He is in color, although in shadow, wearing sunglasses and manipulating an editing program on a video deck where we see the video we have been watching up to this point. The camera focuses on the video deck and the black and white video screen of Hamlet. We see that Hamlet is increasing the volume on his video, and the video shuts off and goes to fuzz. The word Hamlet appears in large letters on a red background that fills the entire movie screen as the title sequence begins and the opening scene ends.

Almeryda's opening scene may be the most difficult for students to analyze, but Almeryda, like Kozintsev, gives us all of the visual images that will become recurring motifs throughout his film. This would be the best way to begin to analyze this scene that is such a departure from Shakespeare's original and the other two films. Clearly technology is a focus of Almeryda's film. The fact that the opening scene is almost entirely made up of us watching a video that Hamlet has created shows this immediately. This video within a film concept recurs frequently. Almeryda has made Hamlet a filmmaker and Ophelia a photographer. So it is important to consider what it means to watch an image or a video within the structure of another film. Almeryda may be commenting on the façades created by the characters in the play, he may be talking about the modern obsession with images, or this may relate to the constant surveillance of people in modern society. In addition to his use of video within a film there are the random images within Hamlet's video to examine. Almeryda said that his movie is "an attempt at *Hamlet*—not so much a sketch but a collage, a patchwork of intuitions, images, ideas" (qtd. in Crowl 189). Having the students think about this quotation may be an interesting way to have them approach their analysis of this scene.

Beyond the technology used in the opening scene the glitzy world of New York City is displayed. We are first

introduced to New York looking up through a car sky light like an excited tourist. Then we move to Times Square, considered the center of New York to most tourists. Finally we see the shiny glass and metal "castle," Hotel Elsinore. David Denby says, "The black towers of Times Square, fretted with neon, tessellated with ledges, balconies, and catwalks, make a sinister and elegant setting for the power struggles" (qtd. in Crowl 190). Denby talks of New York as a setting, but I believe this setting becomes more of a character in the film. Almercyda constantly reminds us that Hamlet is surrounded by this modern city, and we are introduced to the film through the city. In addition, the shiny glass and metal of Hotel Elsinore are startlingly reflective in an otherwise darkly lit opening scene. This persists throughout the film as "the city, through Almercyda's camera, becomes one huge, glittering mirror, refracting light and reflecting images" (Crowl 190). This idea of reflection and mirrors connects well to Hamlet's constant internal reflection within the play, as well as the strange function of mirrors. Mirrors can show us an image of ourselves, but that image may not necessarily reveal truth. The theme of hiding from one's true self is a persistent theme within Shakespeare's play.

One difficulty to Almercyda's opening scene is the lack of women characters. His opening scene is about Hamlet, New York, technology, images, and reflection. The women are absent. Since my unit will also focus on the portrayal of women in the play I will have my students discuss the effect of the absence of women in the opening scene. Kozintsev and Zeffirelli both chose to show us Gertrude grieving in the opening scene, but Almercyda chooses to show us only Hamlet discussing his grief via a video screen. This choice says much about Almercyda's positioning of the women in the film, or at least of Hamlet's relationship to the women in the film. Almercyda has already isolated Hamlet from his audience by giving us access to his grief through the filter of a video screen, perhaps Hamlet is also isolating himself from the women in the play. Regardless, the absence of women from this opening scene seems peculiar because of the focus on Gertrude in the other two opening scenes.

An interesting twist to Almercyda's opening scene that is also a bit problematic is the summary he gives the audience. The final line "The King's son, Hamlet, returns from school, suspecting foul play . . ." is an unusual interpretation of what is going on at this point in the play. In Shakespeare's version Hamlet has left Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral and he stays for his mother's wedding. When he leaves school he does not suspect anything, and that is why his meeting with the ghost later in the play is so important. It is quite a departure from the text for Almercyda to tell his audience that Hamlet is suspicious of his father's death. This is an important discussion to have with students. This line of text across the screen at the beginning of the film pushes a certain interpretation and impacts the audience's reaction to characters when they meet them.

The Women

Now that we have looked at the opening scenes of the film it is time to turn to the women. The students' examination of the opening scenes will help them learn the focus of the film, which will enable them to effectively analyze the scenes with the women. We will watch the scenes with Gertrude where she encourages Hamlet to stay in Denmark, the bedroom scene, and the final scene where she dies. For Ophelia we will watch her conversation with her family about Hamlet, her scene with him where they are spied upon, and her insanity scene. If there is time we will also watch the play within a play scene.

Kozintsev creates two very interesting women in his play. Gertrude, played by Elza Radzin-Szolkonis a puzzling creation and not as clearly drawn as Ophelia, played by Anastasiya Vertinskyaya. Kozintsev goes to great lengths in his opening scene to show Gertrude's grief. We seemingly have a clear picture of who Gertrude is at this point in the play, yet the next time we see her she is distant and preoccupied. After the announcement is made that she and Claudius have married, Kozintsev shows her speaking to her son. They

walk quickly through the castle, and she barely looks at him. Instead she looks at her image in a mirror, preparing herself to be seen by the court. This woman who was clutching at her son in their previous scene together is clearly keeping her distance. Perhaps this is from guilt, or maybe she is refusing to admit her actions are wrong, or perhaps she is a selfish woman. Our introduction to Ophelia is just as strong as our introduction to Gertrude, yet Ophelia's character seems much clearer. She is plainly being portrayed as a young, innocent victim in the play. When we first meet her, Vertinskyaya, a very pale blond girl, is bathed in white light. She appears to glow from within as she dances to music with her father watching in the next room. Her dancing is "like a mechanical doll" (Rothwell 186). This creates the impression that she is controlled by her father who is watching from the next room. Kozinstev continues to suggest that the innocent Ophelia is manipulated by encasing her in hard, unyielding corsets and strangling her in heavy veils. Within the film Ophelia is clearly a victim and we are meant to sympathize with her. In contrast Gertrude, after the opening scene, is "cold and lifeless" (Crowl 60). Her portrayal is not as clearly defined as Ophelia's.

This vague impression of Gertrude and clearly defined Ophelia should lead to some interesting discussion in the classroom. Gertrude, in Shakespeare's play, is a confusing character. One is never sure whether she is guilty of something beyond marrying too quickly, but she is a character who is suspicious none-the-less. Kozinstev's illusive Gertrude may have been created with this idea in mind. Our initial sympathy for the character is challenged by her behavior in the rest of the film, and this may create resentment and suspicion toward Gertrude. However, Kozinstev ensures that there can be no suspicion that Gertrude is involved in the plot to kill Hamlet. She actually arrives late to the duel, automatically making her innocent and leading to her death. Ophelia, on the other hand, is usually interpreted as an innocent victim in the play. Kozinstev takes this idea and enhances it by enveloping her in confining costumes, surrounding her by observers, and pouring clear white light over her. She becomes more than just a girl who is pushed around, she becomes a symbol of innocence abused and destroyed. Her pitiful funeral solidifies this idea. Kozinstev takes Shakespeare's female characters and enhances their most intriguing characteristics.

Zeffirelli's women are quite a contrast to Kozinstev's. Zeffirelli pits Gertrude against Ophelia in his film by making Gertrude the focal point in the movie. Gertrude, played by Glenn Close, is sensuous, passionate, and sexual. Kenneth Rothwell notes that Close turns "Freudian subtext into hypertext by rarely missing opportunities to kiss fervently both her husband and son full on the mouth" (141). In fact she is so physical with her son that it is hard to believe that there is not a sexual relationship between them. Ophelia, played by Helena Bonham-Carter, is certainly less physical and also less visually compelling in the film. Where Gertrude touches, caresses, and kisses, Ophelia steps back, casts her eyes to the floor, and wrings her hands. Zeffirelli dresses Gertrude in sky blue, airy creams, and sparkling silver and gold trims. Ophelia is rarely seen in anything other a dingy white or rough brown. When the two characters are in the same scene it is hard to look away from Gertrude, who under Zeffirelli's lighting and costumes, appears more youthful and energetic than the uncertain, bland Ophelia.

Zeffirelli's film creates a love triangle between Gertrude, Claudius, and Hamlet, and poor Ophelia becomes a random distraction for Hamlet. This is clearly shown in the bedroom scene which is startling in its violence and sexual nature. Hamlet is on top of Gertrude doing a disturbing mock rape as he lambasts Claudius and her relationship with him. Gertrude then does something rather interesting; she kisses her son on the mouth. This kiss goes far beyond the light kisses on the mouth we have seen before in the film. This kiss is extended, becoming extremely passionate and is only interrupted by the appearance of the ghost. After this scene Zeffirelli makes it hard not to believe that Hamlet is on a quest for revenge not simply because his father was murdered, but because his mother was stolen from him. This firmly places Gertrude at the center of the film and Ophelia off on the side.

Despite Zeffirelli's clear intentions to make Gertrude the focus of the film, Carter's powerful performance challenges Gertrude. "Carter is so compelling as Ophelia that she almost runs away with the film, a rare thing for poor Ophelia" (Anderegg 19). Zeffirelli only places her front and center in two scenes, but she is captivating in both. One is her mad scene which should always belong to Ophelia, and one is the play within a play, which should be about Hamlet and Claudius. To create this shift Zeffirelli moves lines from an early point within the play to the performance of "The Mousetrap." Hamlet stays with Ophelia for much of the scene when he should be concerning himself with Claudius. Then, when Claudius does react and Hamlet is celebrating his victory, the latter stops to focus on Ophelia. Here he delivers lines from an earlier scene in Shakespeare's text telling Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery, go." Hamlet's interaction with Ophelia throughout this scene makes this scene "less about Hamlet's power struggle with Claudius than about the conclusion of his relationship with Ophelia" (Crowl 58). Zeffirelli's focus on Ophelia rather than Claudius in this scene may show that his version of *Hamlet* is really about the women.

Almeryda presents a rather contemporary approach to the women of the play. Gertrude is played by Diane Verona. This Gertrude is a modern, professional, well dressed woman. She is "bright, alert, stylish" and she "positively glows in Claudius's company" (Crowl 197). One of our first images of her is at a press conference where Claudius announces their marriage. She sits below him on a dais, looking up at him in admiration. She smiles perfectly for the press snapping photos of her. Her simple white blouse and elegant jewelry continue this image of perfection. She seems to be the perfect trophy wife. Ophelia, played by Julia Stiles, is also very modern in her portrayal. We first see Ophelia sitting in the audience of the press conference. She tries to get Hamlet's attention to set up a time to meet him later. She consistently resists her father and brother's attempts to keep her and Hamlet apart. Both of these women evolve throughout the film in unexpected ways. Gertrude, the image of perfection eventually cracks, and Ophelia's resistance crumbles and destroys her. After the murder of Polonius Gertrude begins drinking heavily, showing the audience the humanity underneath the image she strives so hard to create. This image she creates slowly dissolves throughout the film until the final scene. Here it seems clear that Gertrude knows the drink is poisoned, but she drinks it anyway to save her son. At this point the perfect trophy wife is replaced by a mother. Ophelia's attempts at resistance seem futile. When Polonius is waving her letter from Hamlet in front of Hamlet's parents she tries to snatch it away. She stands on the edge of a pool and thinks about jumping in to escape her father. "Stiles resists her brother and father, but the price of her resistance is repression" (Crowl 196). When her father and Claudius use her to spy on Hamlet she cries as they hook up the wire, but does not pull away. She has become broken by their commands and manipulation. Her mad scene is placed in a very public arena, a show at the Guggenheim. Almeryda films her running up the various levels of the museum in a long shot, showing the effect of her pain and grief on everyone at the museum. It is her last attempt at resistance, forcing the private family affairs into a public arena, but it ends with her suicide.

Objectives

This unit will address several of the objectives of an AP English Literature course. The first objective this unit meets is C1. This states that "the works selected for the course should require careful, deliberative reading that yields multiple meanings." Our reading of William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* clearly meets this objective. In fact, the multiple meanings of the text will be highlighted by the various films we use in class as well as our own discussions in class.

The second objective met will be C2. This requires that students write an "analytical essay in which students draw upon textual details to develop an extended explanation/ interpretation of the meaning of a literary text." This objective will be met by the final essay which examines the effect of the portrayal of Gertrude or Ophelia in one of the films on the interpretation of the actual Shakespeare text. Students will examine all three Ophelias and Gertrudes in the films, and we will also discuss the characters created through the written text. Their analysis will require them to use textual information from not only a written text, but from film as well.

Students will also meet objective C3 which states that "The student draws upon textual details to make and explain judgments about a work's artistry and quality, and its social and cultural values." This is one of the central ideas of this unit. Students need to consider the societies that created the works we are reading and viewing in order to make informed decisions about a director's particular vision. The students also need to do this when they consider what led the director to decide to make a film of *Hamlet* at that point in history. When they consider the culture and the society from which the film came, they may gain insight into why the director changed or interpreted Shakespeare's text the way he did.

We will also work on objective C4 which asks that "students have frequent opportunities to write and rewrite formal, extended analyses." Clearly while working on their essays the students will go through several drafts. During the writing process I offer to meet with my students individually after school or at lunch to go over a rough draft with them. Once they hand in the final copy, I write comments on the essay, grade it, and give them the opportunity to revise their essay for a better grade if they are unhappy with their grade or wish to develop their paper further.

Strategies

The strategies that I use in this lesson are not that far removed from most strategies that teachers use in an English classroom. I will use a discussion model and note taking skills. These are not unusual strategies for any English teacher. However, we each have our own approach to these things, so I will lay out my expectations for these activities. The only slightly new strategy I will use in this unit that may be outside the realm of a regular English class is the creation of a story board.

First my students will need to learn to take notes properly. There will be two types of notes used in this unit. There are the notes on the films and the notes on the text of the play itself. The notes they take while reading the play will not be a new experience for my students. Throughout the year I ask my students to keep a double entry journal while reading any text for the class. To do this they take a regular notebook with lined paper and divide each page into two vertical columns. In the left hand column they are expected to write down lines from the text that are of some importance. These lines might reveal something about a character, demonstrate a literary technique, raise a question, etc. On the right column directly across from the quotation they are to write some comment about that quotation. I also encourage my students to leave a little extra room around their comment in the right hand column. This way, if some interesting ideas come up in class discussion about the quotation, they will have space to add more. The students will also have to take notes on the films. This is something I am fairly new to myself, but it can be extremely overwhelming. When I first started taking notes on film I wanted to write everything down, and I ended up missing the action because I was concentrating on my notebook rather than the scene. Film critics and writers have a version of shorthand

they use when taking notes, but I find this a bit confusing. It is really only useful to learn if you are going to take notes on many, many films. However, teachers may want to teach students to use the short hand for a few important things. If you choose to do this Tim Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing about Film* has a useful section on the shorthand. This is the approach I will take with my students. I want them to pay attention to the scenery, music, images, and camera angles in the film. To help them do this I plan to teach them the short hand for a few of the notes on camera angles. For example students can write "cu Gertrude" for a close up of Gertrude or "la of Hamlet" to show that Hamlet was film from a low angle. Just giving my students a few of these short hand tips for things that I know will show up in the clips may help them handle the pressure of writing down what they see. In addition, it is important for students to see the clips multiple times. Few of us can write about or discuss anything in detail that we have only seen once, and it would be unfair to expect our students to do the same.

The activities set up throughout this unit require students to be familiar with a discussion model. My classroom is set up so that the desks sit in a U shaped formation. This provides the students with a clear view of each other and encourages discussion among students rather than discussion between a student and the teacher. Often on discussion days I will pull the chairs into a large circle to encourage more exchanges between the students. In my AP English class I usually have animated participation, but that is not the case in all classrooms. In classes with reluctant participants you may choose to develop a class participation chart. This can be created with a simple class list. Every time a student speaks put a mark next to their name on the chart. Before beginning discussion, inform the class that number of times each student is expected to participate. This number should changes depending on the class size. This is an effective and simple technique, but it does create expectations for points every time there is a class discussion. I recommend only using this strategy as a last resort.

The final strategy that I will use is a story board. One of things I would like my students to examine in this unit is the deleting or moving of the first scene of Shakespeare's play. After viewing and discussing the scenes my students will create storyboards of the opening scene for a *Hamlet* film of their own creation. A storyboard is essentially a visual representation of what a director plans to film. Each box shows what we would see through the lens of the camera. Below the boxes there is usually instruction or text to explain what is occurring during that shot. Many people relate comic books or comic strips to storyboards. It might be helpful to look at comic books or show your students a page or two of a comic book to get some ideas of what a storyboard could look like. For this storyboard students can choose to use Shakespeare's original scene, use a scene from another place in the play, or create their own scene. They will sketch out their scene on 11 x 14 paper. The paper should be divided into blocks so that they can sketch out the shots with room for textual explanations of the shots underneath. These storyboards will be presented to the class, so you could also have the storyboards placed on overhead transparencies. A student's images could be scanned into a computer and printed or Xeroxed as transparencies. This way the student could project his/her images on a larger screen and make it easier for the whole class to see their vision. In addition to the storyboard the students would have to include a typewritten explanation of what kind of film version of *Hamlet* this opening scene would produce. What would their film look like? What ideas, themes, or images would they bring out in the film? How does their vision of the opening scene support this?

Classroom Activities

My unit will begin with some basic review and discussion and then we will move on to viewing and discussing the opening scenes of the films. I have chosen to show my students the three openings prior to reading the opening scene of the play. I believe that this will enable the students to approach the films with an open mind. I know that I am always looking for certain things when I see a movie adaptation of a book, and I also know that I generally prefer the book to the movie. While I have learned to appreciate film adaptations of novels, it is because I studied adaptation in my seminar at Yale. After going through the seminar I feel that I understand film a little better and that I can learn things about a piece of literature by viewing a film adaptation. This is what I hope my students can learn to do in this unit. Therefore my unit must begin with their viewing and discussing the scenes prior to reading the original William Shakespeare text.

Below I have a day by day plan of how I hope to cover this unit in my class. I give my students a monthly calendar with our activities, readings, and homework on it so that we both have a clear idea of what needs to be accomplished on each day. This unit could easily eat away at your classroom time, so I thought a daily plan would be the best approach to setting up my unit for my use as well as others. Ideally I will begin this unit at the beginning of the week.

WEEK 1

Day 1

I present the idea of adaptation of literature to film. We will discuss what it means to adapt something as opposed to making something that was "inspired by." We will talk about adapting from canonical texts, cultural reservoir, well known texts, poorly written texts, etc. We will also talk about their own personal experiences viewing adaptations.

Day 2

I will begin by doing a review of William Shakespeare and his literature. My students have read his plays before, so this review is just cursory.

Next I will inform them that we will review three opening scenes from three different adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. We will discuss how to take notes while watching a film and I will give the students some of the short hand notations they can use while watching the clips.

Finally, we will discuss what they should expect from an opening scene of a film, play, or book.

Days 3 and 4

I will show the first clip of Grigori Kozintsev's film. During the first showing I will ask the students to watch and observe only. After the clip is over I will ask them to make a few notes on things they thought were significant or interesting. Then I will ask them to write down what they think the film might be about. We will watch the clip one more time, and I will allow the students time to flesh out their notes before beginning our discussion.

Our discussion will focus on three central questions. First, what feelings or emotions are conveyed by the opening scene? How does Kozintsev create those feelings? Second, what do they think the film is about? What

is going on in the film? Third, do any women characters seem to be important to the film? How are they presented?

The steps above will be repeated for the Zeffirelli and Almereyeda versions.

Day 5

Today we will discuss all of the opening scenes. We will discuss which director's opening scene is the most powerful. Who creates the mood of the film clearly? What images are most powerful? Which film grabs the audience's attention the most? Which film seems to convey the concept of the film in the clearest manner? Which film would they most like to watch? After this discussion the students will be assigned the play to read by the following Friday. Act I, however, must be read by Monday.

WEEK 2

Days 6 and 7

Today we will examine William Shakespeare's opening scene. I will ask the students what he is presenting in his scene and how it sets up the rest of the events in Act I. We will look at the literary techniques he uses in the scene to create mood, tension, and suspense. We will also discuss the visual imagery used in his scenes throughout the first Act. After looking at the text I will ask the students if their reading of the text has changed their perceptions of the opening scenes of the films. We will also begin considering why the directors chose to reject Shakespeare's opening scene. Do they think one of the directors got it right, or is Shakespeare's scene better? What images, ideas, or emotions from Shakespeare's play are brought out in the opening scenes we viewed? These discussions may require a review of the clips from the films.

Students will be asked to be ready to discuss Acts I through III for Wednesday.

Day 8

We will now discuss the role of Gertrude and Ophelia. We will examine what role the women seem to have in the play. I would like the students to identify lines of dialogue that they feel reveals some important aspect of Gertrude or Ophelia's characters. We will also refer back to the opening scenes. What interpretations do Zeffirelli and Kozintsev seem to be making about Gertrude in their opening scenes? Are they right?

Days 9 and 10

I will present the storyboard concept to the students. We will look at storyboards examples, comic strips, and pages from comic books. I will explain the storyboard assignment to the students, and review what should occur in the opening scene of a film. As a viewer, what do they expect from the beginning of a film? They will then begin brainstorming and sketching their ideas down. This project will be due next Friday.

Week 3

Day 11 and 12

Over the course of the next two days we will discuss the play in its entirety. We will discuss the elements of tragedy within the play and how they work within the piece. Our primary focus in this discuss, however, will be the role of Gertrude and Ophelia in the play. It will be important for the students to use their double entry

notes throughout these two days. I always try to get my students to ground their opinions and interpretation in the text. We will explore the relationships these women have with each other and the other characters in the play. We will look specifically at Hamlet's relationship with the two women. How would they define his relationship with each of them? Did he love Ophelia? Does he love his mother? We will also look at their relationship with him. How did Ophelia really feel about Hamlet? Were his actions the cause of her insanity or was it something else? Gertrude alternately dotes on her son and seems to ignore feelings? How does she feel about him? Is she a good mother? Was she a good wife? While we discuss these things I would like the students to consider not only the lines these women speak, but they should also consider their actions. Movement can play an important role in a character's portrayal on the screen, and I would like them to begin moving in this direction.

Day 13

Today we will begin viewing some scene of the women in the films. We will begin the class by talking about their expectations for the portrayal of the women in Kozinstev's film. They should comment on what in the opening scene makes them think this way. I will ask them to write them down some of these expectations before viewing and note taking on the scenes. After this we will begin watching the some of the scenes with Gertrude and Ophelia. We will watch the scenes with Gertrude where she encourages Hamlet to stay in Denmark, the bedroom scene, and the final scene where she dies. For Ophelia we will watch her conversation with her family about Hamlet, her scene with him where they are spied upon, and her insanity scene. If there is time we will also watch the play within a play scene.

Day 14

Today we will review and discuss the scenes we viewed yesterday. We will review their expectations for the characters, and then we will begin to discuss how these women were portrayed. I will ask the students to refer to their notes when discussing so that we can watch some of the scenes again if they need clarification. I would like the students to pay particular attention to the opening scene with Ophelia and the first scene after the opening with Gertrude. These scenes are rather revealing and demonstrate much of what Kozinstev seems to want his audience to learn or believe about these women.

At the end of class we will review the opening of Zeffirelli's film, and I will ask the students to come to class with notes of how they expect Gertrude and Ophelia to be portrayed in his movie.

Day 15

Today we will watch the some of the scenes with Gertrude and Ophelia from Zeffirelli's film. We will watch the scenes with Gertrude where she encourages Hamlet to stay in Denmark, the bedroom scene, and the final scene where she dies. For Ophelia we will watch her conversation with her family about Hamlet, her scene with him where they are spied upon, and her insanity scene. If there is time we will also watch the play within a play scene. We will probably have to watch the scenes several times in order for the students to take detailed notes.

Week 4

Day 16

Today we will review and discuss the scenes we viewed on Friday from the Zeffirelli film. We will review their

expectations for the characters, and then we will begin to discuss how these women were portrayed. I will ask the students to refer to their notes when discussing so that we can watch some of the scenes again if they need clarification.

At the end of class we will review the opening of *Almereyda's* opening, and I will ask the students to come to class with notes of how they expect Gertrude and Ophelia to be portrayed in his movie.

Day 17

Today we will watch some of the scenes with Gertrude and Ophelia from *Almereyda's* film. We will watch the scenes with Gertrude where she encourages Hamlet to stay in Denmark, the bedroom scene, and the final scene where she dies. For Ophelia we will watch her conversation with her family about Hamlet, her scene with him where they are spied upon, and her insanity scene. If there is time we will also watch the play within a play scene. We will probably have to watch the scenes several times in order for the students to take detailed notes.

I will ask the students to come to class tomorrow with detailed notes about the various adaptations we have seen and if they feel the portrayals of Gertrude and Ophelia change their view of the text or how the text is interpreted.

Day 18

Today will be a large group discussion of their views of the women in the films and the play. We will discuss effectiveness of the various adaptations, what each director seemed to be saying about the women, and how these adaptations may have changed the way they view the play. This discussion should be grounded in the actual film clips and the text of the play itself. In order to do this I will constantly ask students to back up their statements with points of reference from the film or lines from the text. I will also be prepared to show various film clips to the students if necessary.

Day 19

We will continue our discussion from yesterday, but today students will need to focus on the impact of the portrayal of the women. Which was the most compelling, interesting, or moving? Why? Was that adaptation a true vision of what Shakespeare created in his text, or is it a new and more interesting vision of the character? This discussion mimics the paper topic the students will receive at the end of the period. Students will be expected to write an essay that examines either Gertrude or Ophelia in one of the film versions. The central idea of the essay should answer what this adaptation of the character presents, is this adaptation true to the text, or is it a new and more interesting vision of the character?

Day 20

Today will be a writing day in class. Students will begin to formulate thesis statements, generate ideas, and begin the drafting process. I will circulate around the room to discuss ideas with them and to help some students make decisions. I will have two DVD players available for the students to review clips. This paper will be due in one week. I will recommend that students sign up for meetings with me during lunch or after school to review their drafts before the due date.

Annotated Bibliography

Anderegg, Michael. *Cinematic Shakespeare*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

This source was good for getting background about a variety of Shakespeare films. This gave me a solid basis for my research and unit. However, I found only a few bits of his analysis of the films I use to be helpful.

The Boydell Shakespeare Prints. London, 1968.

This book has an amazing series of prints from a show produced in the late 1780s. John Boydell sponsored a series of painting of scenes from Shakespeare plays. He then commissioned etching of those paintings. The paintings were put on display in The Shakespeare Gallery, and the etchings were produced in giant prints. Later the prints were produced in a more manageable size and they appear in this book. These prints are a great way to examine stills of scenes from Shakespeare. These prints may even help the students with their storyboards.

Corrigan, Timothy J. *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. New York: Pearson

Longman, 2007.

This book covers the basics of film writing. It was my initiation into this genre of writing, and I found it extremely helpful. Corrigan breaks the terms and ideas down in such a way that a layperson can easily acquire an understanding of film and film writing.

Crowl, Samuel. *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2003.

This book was incredibly helpful in my analysis of the Zeffirelli *Hamlet*. I found it difficult to find solid analysis of Zeffirelli's film, but Crowl takes this film very seriously. He dedicates a good chunk of the book to this film and has interesting theories about Zeffirelli's approach.

Hamlet. Dir. Michael Almereyda. Perf. Ethan Hawke, Julia Stiles, and Diane Verona. DVD Miramax Films, 2000.

This is the version of *Hamlet* starring Ethan Hawke as Hamlet, Julia Stiles as Ophelia, and Diane Verona as Gertrude.

Hamlet. Dir. Grigori Kozintsev. Perf. Innokenti Smoktunovsky, Anastasiya Vertinskaya, and Elsa Radzin-Szolkonis. DVD Facets Multimedia, 2006.

This is the Russian version of the play. It is in black and white and has subtitles.

Hamlet. Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. Perf. Mel Gibson, Helena Bonham-Carter, Glenn Close. DVD Warner Home Video, 2004.

This is the version starring Mel Gibson as Hamlet, Glenn Close as Gertrude, and Helena Bonham Carter as Ophelia.

Hatchuel, Sarah. *Shakespeare, From Stage to Screen*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

This book gave me a really solid background on the transition William Shakespeare's plays have made throughout the ages. Hatchuel covers Shakespeare stage productions from the Elizabethan era to the film versions of his plays today. This gave me an understanding of why some of the changes have been made to his plays when they are transferred to the screen.

Hindle, Maurice. *Studying Shakespeare on Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Hindle's discussion of Kozintsev was very good. It helped me think about the film in a variety of ways.

Kozintsev, Grigori. *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1966.

This is a fascinating book from a teacher's perspective. Kozintsev analyzes Shakespeare, and it helped me gain insight into Kozintsev's film. There is an entire section in the book on *Hamlet* that is particularly informative and interesting. While it is not necessary to read this book to analyze the film, I feel better prepared to teach the film having read this book.

Leaming, Barbara. *Grigori Kozintsev*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980.

I read this out of simple curiosity. Kozintsev's film is my favorite of the ones I use in this unit, and it comes out of a distinctly different culture. I thought it would be helpful to learn the life that led to the creation of the film. This is only useful if you are planning to cover the context during which the films were created. I hope to cover this at some point in my unit, so this book was helpful to me.

Rothwell, Kenneth S. *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

Rothwell's book is cited in many of the sources in this bibliography. The general consensus seems to be that if you are studying Shakespeare films you need to read this book. I did find his information on Zeffirelli and Kozintsev helpful.

O'Brien, Peggy, ed. *Teaching Hamlet and Henry IV Part 1*. Shakespeare Set Free Ser. New York: Pocket Books, 1994.

This book comes from the Folger Shakespeare Library and is full of fun activities for teachers to use when teaching the Bard. It is a wonderful source for daily activities.

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