

“Who’s there?” Finding Meaning in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

by
Mark Spring

Grade Level: 12th Grade English/Language Arts

Length of Lesson: 90 minutes or two approximately 45-minute periods

Overview of the Lesson: Students will work alone, in groups, and as a class to analyze two passages from *Hamlet*, and they will study “Film Interpretations of Hamlet on Glogster to critically evaluate three different film interpretations of these same two passages.

Learning Goals:

In the first half of the 90-minute class (or in the first 45-minute session), students will closely re-read two selected passages in *Hamlet*, and they will apply literary analysis strategies to develop personal interpretations of each passage. First, students will analyze the passages on their own, producing a written artifact of their understanding of the text. Next, students will compare their interpretations with peers in small groups to debate their interpretations. Groups will share their findings and questions with the whole class. Each individual will post his or her interpretation of the passages on Moodle or in Google Documents where peers and teachers may review and comment on each student’s writing.

In the second half of the class (or in the next 45-minute session), students will use Glogster to view three different film interpretations of the passages that the students have already analyzed. Students will comment on how their own readings of the play compare and differ with the visions presented by the filmmakers. They will write about their impressions in a differentiated lesson plan that asks three groups of students one of a series of overlapping questions about each of the passages and their corresponding film excerpts.

Each stage of this lesson will promote students’ development of metacognition. First, individual students will reflect on how they create meaning when they read a text; then they will see multiple illustrations of how the same words may support or inform a variety of interpretations when they share with their peers. When students debate their conclusions about each filmmaker’s reading of the play, students will reflect in more depth on how individuals and groups differ and compare in how they find meaning in a text.

NC Common Core Standards Being Addressed:

RL.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RL.11-12.7. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.).

Materials Needed:

Copies of *Hamlet*.

Copies of two selected passages students will examine in depth:

(option: post copies as Google Documents)

- (1) Hamlet’s first meeting with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (through Hamlet’s discourse on “What a piece of work is man...”).
- (2) Hamlet’s “To be or not to be...” soliloquy.

Pen/cil and paper.

Individual copies of question sets for individuals in each differentiated group.

Access to computers to post and read reflections in online forums.

Access to Glogster to study “Film Interpretations of *Hamlet*” (may use one main computer in class; students may review the site at a later time).

<http://leaftail.edu.glogster.com/film-interpretations-of-hamlet/>

How the Lesson Will Flow (in a 90-minute lesson OR in a two-day lesson):

BEFORE the LESSON: Students will have closely read each passage that students will focus on throughout this lesson; they will have completed written interpretations of each passage that the teacher will have reviewed and handed back to students for use in this lesson):

0-5 minutes: Teacher asks students to read over the assignment’s goals and to explain them to the teacher and to the class. Students prepare for individual and group work:

6-10 minutes: Students refresh their memories of their interpretations and fine tune their comments on each passage.

11 – 18 minutes: They compare their readings of the first passage in groups of three.

19 - 25 minutes: Students share their ideas on passage #1 with the whole class.

26 – 33 minutes: Students compare their readings of the second passage with new group partners.

33 – 39 minutes: Students share their ideas on passage #2 with the whole class.

40 – 45 minutes: Students and the teacher discuss whether meaning is located in the author’s words, in the reader’s mind, or in the encounter between the reader and the text. (This discussion reprises similar conversations about language and meaning that students and the teacher will conduct throughout the year).

46 – 50 minutes (beginning of “day two” for teachers with shorter class sessions): Students prepare to work in differentiated groups (named after characters in *Hamlet*) to develop individual and small group interpretations of three filmmakers’ interpretations of the same two passages from the play. See attached forms for each group’s questions.

51 – 81 minutes: Students will view and critique each series of clips. They will debate their individual answers to the group’s main questions with their small-group peers.

82 – 90 minutes: Groups will begin to discuss their agreements and disagreements in response to their respective main questions. Other groups will listen in and either support or challenge their peers’ readings of the play and critiques of the films.

HOMEWORK: The latter conversation can continue in written reflections to post to an online forum AND/OR students can respond to the Voicethread prompt at the bottom of the Glog: “What does it mean ‘to be?’”

Assessment: Please see the rubric attached with these lesson plan materials.

Sources:

Almereyda, M. (Director). (2000). *Hamlet* [Motion Picture]. United States: double A Films.

Branagh, K. (Director). (1996). *Hamlet* [Motion Picture]. United States: Castle Rock Entertainment.

Kosintsev, G., & Shapiro, I. (Directors). (1964). *Hamlet* [Motion Picture]. Soviet Union: Lenfilm Studio.

Shakespeare, W. (1992). *Hamlet (Norton Critical Editions)*. 2nd Ed. C. Hoy, (Ed). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Part II: Predict which film will offer the richest interpretation of Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy. Most importantly, offer some reasons to support your prediction.

You may find it helpful to refer to your notes and to comments you and your peers made in the discussion we have just concluded.



Which parts of your prediction proved to be accurate or inaccurate?



Which one of these films would you most like to view, and why?



Part III: Go to the Voicethread, “To Inter-Be,” listed at the bottom of the Glog. Watch the 90-second video clip, view the painting, read the slides, and make comments on one or any of the topics. Use your keyboard, microphone, or cell phone to let us hear your voice.

MAIN QUESTIONS: In your estimation, which of these films most effectively employs elements such as *setting, music (or silence), and lighting to create a specific mood for this scene? Which filmmaker would you hire to produce a version of your favorite Shakespeare play?*

Shakespeare’s text offers little guidance on the specifics of how the play should be staged; thus, filmmakers often assume a bold creative license in creating this dimension of the film. Their creative departures may have a strong precedent: details of how performers designed the background and costumes for Shakespeare’s play probably varied from performance to performance even in Shakespeare’s day.

Here is one more question to ponder: As technological equipment improves (even to the point where filmmakers can design life-like, digital replicas of whole cities and landscapes), should filmmakers present Shakespeare’s play in the most modernized form possible? Or is imagining and reconstructing a vision of the past *as it might have been* a more important goal?

Use the boxes, below, to make some notes on each film as you watch. View the clips in any order.

After you’ve viewed the clips and made notes, answer the main question in the space below these boxes.

Ethan Hawke (Modern) Version

Kosintsev (Russian) Version

Branagh (Classical) Version

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RESPONSES TO THE MAIN QUESTION (Please write in complete sentences):

Part II: Predict which film will offer the richest interpretation of Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy. Most importantly, offer some reasons to support your prediction.

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Which one of these films would you most like to view, and why?



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Rubric for “Who’s There?” Interpretations of Hamlet

	0 / 1 / 1.5	1.5 / 2 / 2.5	3	TOTAL
Individual Written Interpretations	The writer did not make reference to the text to support his or her interpretation of the passages.	The writer made reference to the text to support his or her interpretation of the passages.	The writer made skillful references to the text to support well-reasoned interpretations of the text.	
Individual Film Critiques	The writer did not make connections between the text and the films.	The writer used the text to support his or her critique of the films.	The writer made excellent use of the text to support his or her well-developed critique of the films.	
Participation / Collaboration	The student did not participate in group discussions.	The student made some useful contributions to group discussions.	The student listened well and contributed strong ideas to group discussions.	
<i>Score</i> Oral Argumentation	0 The student did not express his or her ideas in class discussion.	.6 / .7 / .8 The student voiced ideas for the class to consider.	.9 / 1 The student clearly and convincingly explained his or her ideas for the class to consider.	/ 9 (10 points possible)

COMMENTS:

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