

H·A·M·L·E·T



film education

STUDY GUIDE

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Why Hamlet?

The first thing to remember is that 'Hamlet' was not written to be studied by students in a school or college. It was written to be performed. And despite the fact that you may spend time reading the play itself, the best grasp you can get of the play is to see it performed - to see it enacted in the way that it was meant to engage an audience.

When Shakespeare was writing 'Hamlet', he undoubtedly had certain actors in mind for each part - being the playwright for a theatre company who were based in one theatre meant that he was well aware of the strengths and limitations of his troupe. One should also bear in mind the fact that someone will have directed the play and thus there are a number of additions to the text that could have been made - the actor's and also the director's.

In the same way, any director or actor who has since been involved in a production will also have added or taken away things from the play. Zeffirelli's film of 'Hamlet' is only one possible interpretation of the text.

Adapting from play script to film

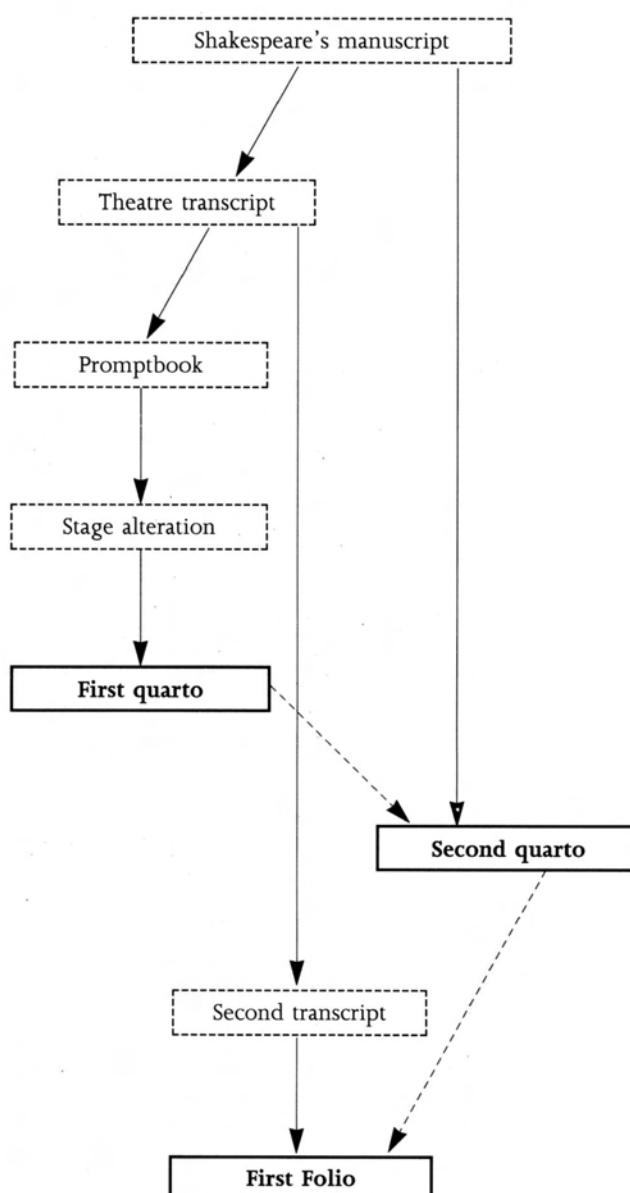
Many of Shakespeare's plays have been adapted for the screen. In fact, film makers have always looked to popular plays and books for the subjects of their films. Why do you think this is? What is the attraction of, say, a Shakespeare play? Can you think of any drawbacks to this approach of film making?

When we talk about an adaptation of 'Hamlet', we are faced with a number of problems. What is the definitive 'Hamlet'?

One of the versions of 'Hamlet' which exists is, if performed in full, over five hours long. It is rare that theatre companies perform this 'complete' 'Hamlet'. Directors often decide to make cuts in the play or to use shorter versions of the play.

There is a school of thought that even Shakespeare might have envisaged the play being performed in different versions - a short version for touring companies, a long version to be performed indoors and an 'in between' version to be performed in a London playhouse.

There is no such thing as a true text of 'Hamlet'. If you look at the chart on the right, you can see that there are three written versions available of the play. As well as these, we must also consider how these different manuscripts came about and think of texts which are no longer available to us (those texts marked in the dotted boxes).



Look at the various versions available - ask yourself the question - is there a definitive text from which to produce a stage version or a film of 'Hamlet'? Who put together the final folio version? Given that one editor of the play describes 'Hamlet' as "a play in motion", who can we say is responsible for the version that you read or see - Shakespeare or the editor of the text?

As well as these, there are also the thousands of performances of 'Hamlet' which the audience for the film version may have seen already. So, when 'Hamlet' arrives on the screen, the audience may already have some knowledge of what 'Hamlet' is, but possibly without knowing exactly what happens in the play.

In each case, the story will be much the same. But what will be different will be the ways in which the story is communicated to us? What methods are involved in communicating the story in each medium?

We can consider 'Hamlet' in three ways - as a written text, as a theatrical production and also now as a film. Also in existence are radio productions, records and tapes of studio productions of the play, comic books of 'Hamlet' and also complete rewritings of the story. What is 'Hamlet'? Is it one of the texts listed in the chart, or is it any production? Is it simply the point of view of the director?

Adapting Hamlet

If you were a director who had chosen to make a film of 'Hamlet', what would be the problems and possibilities that face you?

Think firstly about the possibilities of film. What can be done in the cinema which cannot be done on stage? Secondly, what possibilities does a play script allow you which a novel, for example, would not?



Obviously, one thing that is worth thinking about is the length of the film. If you are aiming at a film about two and a half hours long, then you may not be able to include all of the play script. So, what would you miss out? In Zeffirelli's version of the play, he has left out the character of Fortinbras. What effect does this have on the play? Does it mean that certain interpretations of the play are no longer valid?

In your opinion, what does Fortinbras stand for? In leaving him out, are the ideas and themes associated with his character shown by any other characters, thus retaining the play's themes intact?

As a possible director, the main point for you to consider is what you think the play is about.

Is it a play about political power?

Is it a play about the love of a son for his mother?

Is the play about treachery and intrigue?

Is the play solely about the character of one person?

Is it all of these, or is it none of these?

Once you have decided what the play is about, you can then decide which parts are relevant to your vision of the play, and which are not. This would be the starting point for your adaptation.

In the chart below, write down all of the characters that you think are important in revealing your idea of the film. Are there any that are not important? Could their roles be cut? What else would need to be cut? Next, write down all of the key scenes that need to be included in your adaptation in order to show clearly your idea of the film.

KEY CHARACTERS	
KEY SCENES	

When you have done this, are there any additional scenes that need to be included in your version which would ensure that the basic story line of 'Hamlet' is retained? Which are these scenes?

The next point to bear in mind would be the character of Hamlet himself. Would you need to include every speech that he makes in order to convey his character? From your viewing of the film can you remember which of Hamlet's soliloquies were omitted? Why do you think that Zeffirelli omitted these soliloquies and not others? What additional ideas do the omitted soliloquies give us?

Looking at the character of Hamlet in the film, what would you say Zeffirelli's view of Hamlet's character is? Also, thinking about the work you did earlier on the idea of the play, how does he view the play? Which 'version' of 'Hamlet' is he presenting? How has he communicated this idea to the audience? Is it through the additions, the omissions, the costumes, the settings? Look back at your list of the ways in which film communicates its meanings. You should now consider how many of these methods Zeffirelli has used and how he used them in creating his own vision of 'Hamlet'. How does it compare to your idea of what the play is about?



Judging adaptations

'[Tolstoy] finds that Shakespeare has a certain technical skill which is partly traceable to his having been an actor, but otherwise no merits whatever. He has no power of delineating character or of making words and actions spring naturally out of situations, his language is uniformly exaggerated and ridiculous, and he constantly thrusts his own random thoughts into the mouth of any character who happens to be handy, he displays a 'complete absence of aesthetic feeling' and his words 'have nothing whatever in common with art and poetry'.

'Shakespeare might have been whatever you like,' Tolstoy concludes, 'but he was not an artist'.

From 'Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool' by George Orwell.

Orwell's essay on Tolstoy and Shakespeare highlights some of the problems that are faced when we come to make judgments on any text. How do we decide what is 'good' and what has no merit? When considering a film that is based on a play, we are faced with a double problem - namely, what is the merit of the original play and what is the merit of the adaptation? Are there two sets of values here or only one?

When you come to make a judgment on a play script, how do you decide its merit? Is 'Hamlet' a work of art or does it fit Tolstoy's description of Shakespeare's plays? How do you decide? And what makes a good film? Is there any point of contact between the two sets of values? And where does the theatrical production of a play fit into this scheme?

Write down two lists of criteria that you would use in judging the merit of a play and a film. You could also add to this the criteria that you use when judging a novel. In what areas do the similarities and the differences lie?

Having seen the Zeffirelli version of 'Hamlet', apply to the film the two sets of criteria that you have drawn up. What merits does the film have as a film, and what merits does it have compared to the original play script?

Can a film and play be judged in the same way? If in the past you have studied plays, you might well have seen a film version of a play (a 'film of the play'). It is also possible that you will have seen a theatrical production of the play. In your experience, is a film, no matter how faithful it may be to the play script, a different experience from a theatrical performance for a viewer?



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www.filmeducation.org

Film Education, 91 Berwick Street, London W1F 0BP
t. 020 7292 7330 f. 020 7287 6970 postbox@filmeducation.org

Written by Ian Wall. Designed by Cathy Johnson Design Associates.

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