

CORIOLANUS

Teachers' Notes

This educational resource explores details from the film *Coriolanus* alongside aspects of the play text in a range of activities suitable for students of literature at GCSE level and equivalent.

Synopsis

Coriolanus, a hero of Rome, is a great soldier but despises the people. His extreme views ignite a mass riot and he is banished from Rome. Coriolanus allies with a sworn enemy, Aufidius, to take his revenge on the city. As director and star, Ralph Fiennes brings William Shakespeare's visceral history play to the big screen for the first time. *Coriolanus* is a drama for the ages, a commentary on the precarious draw of war and an auspicious directorial debut from one of the world's great classical actors.

Coriolanus

Dir: Ralph Fiennes

UK release date 20 January 2012

Certificate: 15



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Adaptation

Written between 1605 and 1608, *Coriolanus* is one of Shakespeare's lesser-known plays and one of his last tragedies. This film interpretation uses Shakespeare's language (although the play text has been cut and adapted), yet relocates the story to a modern-day Balkan state.

Look closely at the film poster below, and watch the film's trailer closely https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Di-XOO_LTw



- Who would you say is the usual 'audience' for film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays? From looking closely at the poster and trailer for *Coriolanus*, does the film challenge your expectations of how a film adaptation of Shakespeare might be presented? What sort of audience do you think this film is designed to appeal to, and what details in the poster and trailer give you this impression?
- *Coriolanus* is one of Shakespeare's less well-known plays. What challenges, and what opportunities, do you think this offers to the filmmakers?
- Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, said tragedy aroused emotions of fear and pity in the audience of a play, purging their souls in a process called 'catharsis'. Do you think that people today watch films so they can go through this process of feeling certain emotions, with a sense of relief once the film is over?

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Updating the Action

The filmmakers have to make many decisions when coming up with the concept for the film; for example, the period in which they want it to be set, the location, the actors who will play the different roles and so on. This is before they can begin to think about staging, framing and capturing the action.

Once you have seen the film, use the following questions as starting points for discussion. If you have not yet seen it you can use the clips and images on this site to help you:

- The film depicts both civil unrest – protests by the people – and armed combat. Think back to any recent TV, online or print coverage you have seen of riots and disturbances in the UK or elsewhere in the world. How does this compare to the civil unrest shown in the film *Coriolanus*? And how is the modern media incorporated into the film?
- The play shows divisions of class in the contrast and tensions between the ordinary people and their rulers; the film keeps this aspect, and updates the action to the modern day. How relevant to today do you find these aspects of the plot? How does it compare to your views of the relationship between, for example, the people and the government in this country?
- How is combat portrayed in the film? What, if anything, does this portrayal remind you of?



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Characters

When first approaching a play text, it is important to establish the identity of the main characters and their relationships with one another in the course of the play.

The play and the film *Coriolanus* are named after the principal character in the drama. However, as in some other Shakespeare plays, the title character is known by more than one name: at the start of the play, he is called Caius Marcius. He is given the title *Coriolanus* as a result of his bravery and victory over the city of Corioles.

The Soldier


The play text gives a sense of character through the words and actions of the characters themselves, and through what others say about them and to them. You may already have a strong sense of who the character *Coriolanus* is. In adapting the play for the screen, the filmmakers take key decisions about how the character will look, act and interact with others, to give the audience an immediate impression of the character.



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TASK

Look at these images of *Coriolanus* and explain what connotations you think the images have. Connotations are the associations that images, words or music give us – for example, red often connotes anger, or blood, or passion. Consider the features the filmmakers have used to show their interpretation of the character and see if you can find quotes about the character from the play to support (or challenge) the interpretation.

Images	Features	Connotations	Basis in the text
			
			
			
			

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Extension Activity

Often when thinking about literature, the terms 'hero' or 'villain' will be used to describe characters. From what you know of his character, do you feel either of these terms is an accurate way to describe Coriolanus?

There is a word we take from Greek that is useful in this case: 'protagonist', which roughly translates as the actor who plays the first part. The protagonist of a tragedy will have a tragic flaw that will lead to their downfall. Commonly, this flaw is 'hubris', a Greek (and modern English) word meaning arrogance. This arrogance might spring from various causes or be shown in various ways.

- In what ways do you consider Coriolanus to be arrogant? What heroic or villainous qualities do you think he has?
- Using what you know about Coriolanus' character, and the images and trailer to help you, write a character profile to help an actor playing Coriolanus to understand the role. What other film characters might you compare Coriolanus to in order to encourage an actor to research the role?



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Home Front

As well as being a soldier, Coriolanus is also a husband, a father and a son, and we see these domestic relationships at certain points in the play and the film.

Volumnia, Coriolanus' mother, is a powerful force in the play; for example, she says in Act V 'Thou art my warrior, I help to frame thee' indicating her role in shaping her son's character.

Played by Vanessa Redgrave in the film, Volumnia has evident power over, and great pride in, her son.



- From what you know of the play, how would you describe Volumnia's relationship with her son – what are her hopes and expectations of him?
- How have the filmmakers, and the actress playing Volumnia, interpreted her character? Give evidence for your answer.
- How is Coriolanus' wife Virgilia portrayed in the film, compared to his mother? Consider how Coriolanus behaves towards each of them in the film, giving examples.

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Extension Activity

Read through the following extract from Act I Scene III of the play. If you were directing this scene, how might you use the actors and the camera to convey meaning to an audience in this scene? What elements of the text would you want to emphasise to show how you interpret these two characters and the relationship between them?

VOLUMNIA

I pray you, daughter, sing; or express yourself in a more comfortable sort: if my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love. When yet he was but tender-bodied and the only son of my womb, when youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way, when for a day of kings' entreaties a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding, I, considering how honour would become such a person that it was no better than picture-like to hang by the wall, if renown made it not stir, was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him; from whence he returned, his brows bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man.

VIRGILIA

But had he died in the business, madam; how then?

VOLUMNIA

Then his good report should have been my son; I therein would have found issue. Hear me profess sincerely: had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike and none less dear than thine and my good Marcius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action.

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Now read this extract from Act V Scene III, near the end of the play. Explore Volumnia's character here and Coriolanus' response to her. What does Volumnia want her son to do and how does he respond? How is this scene shown in the film version, and what does the setting and camerawork add to your interpretation?

VOLUMNIA

Think with thyself
How more unfortunate than all living women
Are we come hither; since that thy sight,
which should
Make our eyes flow with joy, hearts dance
with comforts,
Constrains them weep and shake with fear and sorrow;
Making the mother, wife, and child to see
The son, the husband, and the father tearing
His country's bowels out....

Opposing Forces

One convention of dramatic action is for the principal character to be opposed by another, whom they must either defeat, or be defeated by. Coriolanus has his match in the character Tullus Aufidius who leads the Volsces, Coriolanus' enemies at the start of the play.



Aufidius



Coriolanus

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Both characters are brave, strong, successful soldiers: Coriolanus says of Aufidius:

*...he is a lion
That I am proud to hunt.*

(Act I Scene I)

and Aufidius says of Coriolanus:

If we and Caius Marcius chance to meet,
Tis sworn between us we shall ever strike
Till one can do no more.

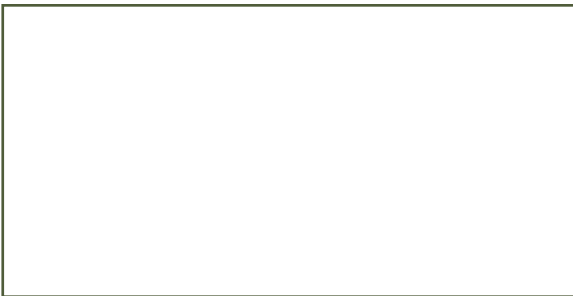
(Act I Scene II)

Task

Using the template on the following page, storyboard a sequence showing an earlier meeting between these two characters that explains Aufidius's vow to fight Coriolanus to the death. Think about how you would show each of the characters and suggest the tension between them, as well as indicating their respect of each other's fighting skill.

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Storyboard



Dialogue/SFX

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