

HENRY V

Plays and Films

Film makers often choose books or plays as a basis for making a film. A large number of Shakespeare plays have been filmed, novels such as ‘The Color Purple’, ‘Tess’, ‘A Passage to India’. Why do you think this is? What is the attraction?

Whilst adaptations have proven popular with film makers, they have also raised a number of problems.

When it comes to dealing with adaptations from a Shakespeare text, as in the case of ‘Henry V’, then we are faced with a further problem. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries theatre directors have usually adopted an approach to staging the plays which did not exist in Shakespeare’s time. They will have sets, often quite lavish, which show the change of scene, period costumes for the actors, special lighting effects. The idea of having sets and backdrops means that between each scene there is a pause whilst the scenery is changed.

In Shakespeare’s time, the flow of the play was far more like the flow of a film — as one set of actors left the stage another would appear. Like the film, which has no pauses between scenes, so the audience of Shakespeare’s time would not have expected any pauses in the action.



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Shakespeare - Popular Author

Anyone who adapts a literary text into a film obviously faces problems. These problems can arise not simply from the text itself but also from the attitudes of the audience and the critics.

Let us start with the text itself. One thing that we need to bear in mind is that the plays were originally intended as scripts for actors and not as texts for readers. You are probably studying the text in a lot of detail. Unlike a poem, which is normally written for close reading, a play text is not written for the same purpose. It always assumes that part of the impact will come from what happens on the stage itself.

What other problems do you think would face someone who is adapting a literary text into a film? In small groups write down as many as you can think of.

Shakespeare - Popular Author

Millions of pounds are often spent in making films. Because film budgets are so large, large amounts of money have to be taken at the box office when the film is released so that the film will make money.

When film producers have an idea to make a film, they have to persuade financiers that an audience exists for the film project. Few people would put money into a film that they think no one will go and see. So, film producers have to put together what is called a “package”, a series of ideas which they hope will persuade people to put money into their project. The film producers will have to have some idea of who will want to see the film and the main selling points of the film.

TASK

You have decided to make a film of the play “Henry V”. What is it about the story that you think would attract audiences? What type of people do you think would want to go and see it?

Make a list of the possible “selling points” of “Henry V”. You might want to stress certain parts of the plot, or certain characters.

Depending on what you have chosen as the main selling points, these might determine the ways in which you adapt the final play. You may choose to leave out sections of the play as they do not fit into the way you see the play appearing on screen. What you may discover is that your selling points are what you think “Henry V” is about.

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Questions to the Producer and the Director

Imagine that you are a member of a company which is thinking of investing in the film of “Henry V”. What questions would you want to put to the director and the producer about the possible film? You might want to ask about the possible audience for such a film or how the director intends to shoot certain scenes and who they think would be the best people to play the various roles. What do the producers see as the appeal of the film? What is it about?

When you have made your list of questions, you could develop this idea further. A number of you in the class will take on the role of the production company and the rest of you will be the financiers. Put your questions to the production group and see if they can think of answers to them. They will need to refer back to the selling point ideas that you have all dealt with earlier.

‘What’s it About?’

If you have completed the exercise above, then you may have come up with certain ideas about what the film is about.

In groups read and discuss the statements below. Each of these offers an opinion either about “Henry V” or the characters in the story.

Decide in your groups which of the statements you agree with or disagree with. Give reasons for your choices.

1. It’s about a war-mongering king.
2. Patriotism is the key to success.
3. Henry tries and succeeds to unite his country.
4. Although Henry wins the war, it is not worth the suffering that is involved.
5. “Henry V” explores different attitudes to war.
6. “Henry V” shows a king who is in touch with his people.
7. Friendship gains more trust than power.
8. In order to be a complete king, Henry has to marry Katherine.
9. Henry is not merely a figurehead. He is a complex character full of doubts.
10. Belief in one’s cause leads to success.

Which of these statements best describe the play? Choose 3.

Henry V - Historical Story

One of the criticisms that is often levelled at adaptations is that certain sections of ‘the original’ are left out of the film.

Let us first look at the ‘original’ of “Henry V”. Shakespeare himself was taking an ‘original’, the true story of Henry V, and adapting the story for the stage. What did he select from history to include in the play and what did he miss out? More importantly, if he did miss out various aspects of the real events, why did he miss out these things?

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One immediate thing that is worth noting is that there was a gap of 5 years between the battle of Agincourt and Henry's marriage to Katherine. During this period, the English yet again invaded France. Why do you think that Shakespeare missed out these details?

Research

Find out what actually happened at the Battle of Agincourt. In the story we are told that only 25 men and 4 noblemen are killed. How close to the truth is this? If it is different from other records, why do you think that Shakespeare used this figure? How does it compare to the number of French killed?

The Genre of History

Even in Shakespeare's time an audience had an idea of what history' plays should be like. Social and political change is a feature of the history plays — the formation of different factions, the changes of loyalty and the uncertainties of war. In Shakespeare's time the film would have been performed in the costumes of the day, not in period costumes. The audience would have had no problem with accepting this.

For a modern day audience, what are our expectations of an historical story?

Try to write down as many things as you can that you would associate with an historical story — whether it be filmed, in a novel or on television.

When we watch the film of "Henry V", how far does it relate to our ideas of what an historical film should be like? How has the director used our expectations of 'history'?

If war is one of the major themes of "Henry V", then how have our expectations and understanding of war changed from those in Shakespeare's time?

The Elizabethans thought that war was good for a country because it kept the unruly elements quiet and that war united a country when things might not be going well. Can you think of any recent events that have produced a similar attitude to war?



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Enter the Chorus

If we have been expecting to see a 'history' film, then the first thing that we see on the screen is something of a shock. We meet the chorus, behind the set in a film studio, in modern dress.

Why do you think that the director chose to film the first part of the play in this way? You may want to go back to the play itself to look again at what the Chorus has to say.

When you have done this, think back to the opening of the film itself and how music and the movement of cameras was used to gain effect. What impression were you given of what was happening?

Why, when the bishop and archbishop are talking, is the scene filmed in close-up? What does this tell us about what they are discussing?

Images and Characters

Because film works through images as well as words, what we see can also influence our understanding of how a character changes as well as what they say and do. Images can also reinforce our sense of the themes of the play and also the characters.

TASK

Choose any three characters from the film and say how their character is built up in the film. You should think about how they are dressed, where we see them, their actions, even their facial expressions. Also think about how the camera treats them. Are they shown in close-up? What sort of lighting is used?



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Aspects of Character

The central character of the film is, not surprisingly, Henry himself. But what sort of view are we given of him?

An audience in Shakespeare's time would probably have had expectations about Henry. As a character he had already appeared in two earlier plays by Shakespeare. So, in one respect, that audience would have 'understood' the character in the same way as we understand, say, Indiana Jones or James Bond. They have seen the character before and so would have expected him to behave in certain ways. Added to this would have been the audience's own knowledge of the real Henry who was looked on as almost a perfect king.

All that we can do is judge what is presented to us in the film. Look at the comments written below. Which do you think, in your opinion, best sum up Henry?

1. Henry is simply looking for glory. He is not concerned about his men.
2. Henry is cruel and barbaric.
3. Henry is sensitive to the sufferings of his men and listens to their complaints.
4. Henry's one ambition is to unite France and England.
5. Henry is an inspiring leader and commands the respect of his men.
6. We are only ever shown the 'public' side of Henry, we never know what he is thinking.
7. Henry puts national unity above personal safety.
8. Henry is a considerate and fair king.
9. We are shown both the heroic and the personal sides of Henry through the battles and through his courting of Katherine.
10. Henry sees plots all about him in England and sees a foreign war as the only hope that he has of saving himself.
11. Henry is an amiable monster.

Flash Backs

One of the additions that the film makers have made to the film is to add in a number of flashbacks to Henry's appearances in earlier Shakespeare plays ("Henry IV", parts one and two). As has been mentioned, Shakespeare's audience would already have known the character of Henry. But the portrait of Henry in these earlier plays is very different.

In the flashback sequences, how is Henry portrayed?

How is this different to the way that we see him in most of the action of the film?

Can you remember when the flashbacks occurred? What was happening in the story?

Why do you think that the film makers have included these flashbacks? Do they give us any further information about Henry which helps us to understand his character?

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“I Remember Him Well”

Bardolph, Pistol and Nym all knew Henry before he became king. From the evidence that you are given in the flashbacks, imagine a conversation between the three of them as they discuss the ways in which the King has changed since the days when they knew him.

You may simply want to write the thoughts of Pistol, the only survivor of the three at the end of the play. How does he view the hanging of Bardolph? The dangers of the campaign?

Situations

In studying the character of Henry we ought to look at him in different situations and try to explain how he is presented. In the chart below, think about each of the scenes listed. How does Henry behave? What do we learn about his character? In the box on the right hand side, try to write a brief description of Henry at each stage.

Receiving the messenger from the French Court	
Dealing with the traitors at Southampton	
At the seige of Harfleur	
On the road to Agincourt	
The night before the battle	
The morning before the battle begins	
During the battle	
His courtship of Katherine.	

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In Depth Profile

When you have completed the work above, you should have some idea about the character of Henry.

Now, you should imagine that you are a feature writer in a magazine. Henry has arrived back from France with his new bride. It is up to you to write an in-depth profile of him for your magazine.

- What will you include in it? How will you present him? Who are you writing for and what will they want to know?

You could use some of the stills included in the guide as illustrations for your article.

Contrasts in the Play

“Henry V” is full of contrasts. Whilst we are shown the magnificence of the court, we are also shown the life of Bardolph, Nym and Pistol. Certain speeches are mirrored by others and give us a different view of what is happening.

Listed below in column one are some key scenes or speeches. Can you write down in the second column with what they are contrasted, and then in the third column what effect this has. We have completed some of the boxes to get you started.

KEY SCENE	CONTRASTING SCENE	EFFECT
The English Court		
Bardolph, Nym and Pistol		
Henry in Battle		
Henry with his troops		
Henry's speech at Harfleur		
The Traitors		

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Letters from a Battlefield

Henry makes a very rousing speech before the battle of Agincourt. The night before the battle, however, as he walks through his troops, talking with them and listening to them, a very different picture emerges of how they view the coming battle.

Williams: “But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all, “We died at such a place”, some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well in battle; for how can they charitably dispose of anything when blood is their argument?”

(Act IV scene i)

TASK

Imagine that you are Williams on the night of the battle and are writing what could be your last letter home. What would you write about?

- The conditions of the soldiers?
- Your fears for the next day?
- What you think of the king?
- What those around you might be saying?
- What the march to Agincourt had been like?

Try to write this letter. As a contrast you could also write the journal of the King for the night before the battle. How different would his thoughts and feelings be to William's?

Read all about it - Viewpoints

One of the main contrasts that we see in Henry is the moment when the English army is in front of the walls of Harfleur. He makes a rousing speech to his troops (“Once more into the breach, dear friends”) and then makes a very threatening speech to the French as to what will happen to the town when the English army are victorious.

Imagine two newspapers of the day — possibly the Harfleur Herald and the London Bugle. How might each have reported the events of the siege of Harfleur? Look very carefully at these two speeches of Henry and try to work out which would be stressed in each newspaper.

Would the French paper have talked about the heroism of the British troops? How would they be presented in the Harfleur Herald?

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In drawing up your two front pages for the newspapers, you should remember the following:

- use a suitable headline
- remember to make it sound like a newspaper article
- you might like to include a photograph or drawing on the front cover

Atmosphere

When we sit in class and read a play, we can often fail to capture some of the atmosphere of the play. Settings, which you probably listed in your charts in exercise one, can help in many ways to create an atmosphere for the play.

What were the main settings in the film? As each one was constructed or chosen especially for the film in order for it to fit in with the director's view of the play, then how did each one add to our understanding of the play?

TASK

Think back to the film and consider any three settings that we are shown. How did each create an atmosphere? Was it to do with the lighting, the camera angles, the design of the set, the choice of location?

The Shooting Script

Although the words to the play already exist, a film director has to decide how to shoot the film - where to place the camera, who will be in the shot. When we read a play in class it may be that we just sit in our desks. In a film, the camera guides us as to who we should see and for how long, how we see them (camera angles, etc) and how each shot is related to the next.

If, for example, the director felt that Henry was a character that we should admire, then he would be presented in a very different way if the director had felt that he was a figure of contempt.

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TASK

In considering how to shoot a scene, complete this exercise.

Below is a short extract from the play. Imagine that you are planning to shoot this scene on film. You need to prepare a storyboard to give the camera operator which will give details of the types of shots that you want, and the way in which you want the audience to see the scene. In twelve shots, on the shot sheets, draw how you would see the sequence being shot. Try to use different camera angles, cutting from one character to another. How can you build up tension in the piece?

KING HENRY

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,
Or close the wall up with our English dead!
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage;
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;
Let it pry through the portage of the head
Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it
As fearfully as doth a galled rock
O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.
Now set the teeth, and stretch the nostril wide,
Hold hard the breath, and bend up every spirit
To his full height! On, on, you noblest English,
Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!
Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,
Have in these parts from morn till even fought,
And sheathed their swords for lack of argument.
Dishonour not your mothers; now attest
That those whom you called fathers did beget you!
Be copy now to men of grosser blood,
And teach them how to war. And you, good yeomen,
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
The mettle of your pasture; let us swear
That you are worth your breeding — which I doubt not;
For there is none of you so mean and base
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.
I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot!
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
Cry, 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'