

Hi Theater Students,

Here are some thoughts on the Hamlet film clips we have watched in class:

Franco Zeffereilli's Hamlet, DVD scenes 12-13 and 30-33

For the Zeffereilli/Mel Gibson film, the hero concept is a "man of action," and the directorial concept is "Denmark's a prison." We saw this visualized as hard stone walls, tiny windows high up in those walls, and dark colors. Hamlet loves Ophelia, but he certainly doesn't show it as he slams Ophelia into one of those walls and throws her necklace back at her. He knows that King Claudius (his uncle) and Polonius (Ophelia's father) are watching and listening to his conversation with Ophelia, so he pretends to be angry and a little crazy when he rejects Ophelia and her love. During his "To be or not to be" soliloquy down in the catacombs beneath the castle, Hamlet sits down beside the tomb of his father. His speech is more about death and grief than about revenge, and somewhat about suicide.

During the finale, only Laertes (Ophelia's brother) and Claudius know about the poison in the wine and on the sword. Gertrude drinks to Hamlet to celebrate his victories in the sword fight, which up until this point has been only a "gentleman's match." She does not know the wine is poisoned. But then Laertes cuts Hamlet's arm with the poisoned sword, and Hamlet fights back, wounding Laertes. Gertrude warns Hamlet just before she dies. Hamlet is beginning to feel the effects of the poison, as Laertes confesses to him what is happening and that King Claudius is responsible. Hamlet then kills Claudius. As Hamlet is dying, he begs Horatio (his best friend) to tell his story and reveal the truth to the Danish people. The final tableau (arrangement of actors and props on stage) recalls the imagery of Jesus Christ on the cross, with Hamlet's arms spread out and his legs straight. This imagery ties in with the idea that Hamlet as a tragic hero suffers for his people, and with his death he has purified his kingdom.

Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet, DVD scenes 25-28 and 55-61

With the Branagh film, in which Kenneth Branagh directs and stars as Hamlet, the directorial concept is "Something is rotten in the state of

Denmark." The hero concept is of a "mad prince." Hamlet delivers his "To be or not to be" soliloquy as he looks at his own reflection in the mirror on one of the doors surrounding the beautiful ballroom. This speech could be more about suicide or revenge, and less about grief because it is so focused. In the scene with Ophelia, Hamlet does not know that Claudius and Polonius are watching. So when he tells Ophelia that she should not love him, he also tells her to go to a nunnery. In other words, get out of the palace! When Hamlet hears the noise somewhere in the ballroom, behind one of the mirrored doors, he then realizes that he and Ophelia are being watched. He cries as he talks to her, losing control of himself and his mind right before her eyes. She prays aloud for him, and then he begins dragging her around the floor as he looks for her father. He seems to become insane during this scene, so Ophelia also becomes distraught for him and for herself.

In the finale of this version (the complete and uncut script), Fortinbras is advancing on the palace while Hamlet and Laertes have the fencing match on the red carpet, a style called "jousting." This time, many of the servants know about the poison in the wine and on the tip of the rapier, but Gertrude still has no idea that she is drinking poisoned wine as she salutes Hamlet. When Laertes cuts Hamlet, chaos erupts in the ballroom. As Gertrude dies, she looks straight at Claudius. Courtiers cry out "Treason!" Then more servants abandon the scene. Hamlet's execution of Claudius is very melodramatic, as he hurls his rapier at Claudius, then sends the chandelier crashing down on Claudius on his throne. The "something rotten" is the poison and the corruption among the royal court. As Hamlet dies, he begs Horatio to clear his name and ensure that civil war will not break out by electing Fortinbras to rule. Just after Hamlet dies, the army of Fortinbras crashes through every door and takes charge of the room. Fortinbras enters, finds out what has happened, has himself crowned, then gives orders for a state funeral for Hamlet. As Hamlet's body is carried out, his arms are spread out like a cross. As his body lies in state, in the palace parade grounds, surrounded by official mourners and a royal funeral guard cohort, the sword on his chest also recalls the cross of Christ. The music swells like a dirge and then into a triumphant chorus.

I hope this will clarify some of the class discussion on these films. Please ask me any other questions in class or via email. I want you to understand and enjoy these film clips! I also want you to use these techniques to analyze our other films we use for play analyses.
sincerely,
Dr. S

Phyllis W. Seawright, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Theatre
Department of Communication
Mississippi College
P. O. Box 4019
Clinton, MS 39058
Phone--(601) 925-3453
[E-mail--seawrigh@mc.edu](mailto:seawrigh@mc.edu)