

**CORE CURRICULUM 3104: LITERATURE AND FILM
SAMPLE MIDTERM ANSWERS**

Question 1: *Hamlet*

Shakespeare, Olivier, and Almereyda interpreted some characters differently. Choose one of the following characters and discuss how two of them presented that character.

- a. Hamlet
- b. Claudius
- c. The Ghost
- d. Ophelia
- e. Gertrude

Student Essay #1

Readers, theatergoers, directors, and actors continue to be fascinated by Hamlet more than four hundred years after its premiere. The themes of revenge, love, and madness are complicated by ambiguity (Is Hamlet really mad? Or just pretending to be?), false starts and delay (Hamlet's vengeance), and tragedy (Ophelia's death), which all enrich the drama with room for interpretation.

Actor/director Laurence Olivier fell in love with the psychological contours of Hamlet's character, and this is evident in the visual language of his film. It opens with fog, a film noir influence, and a voiceover to tell us we are about to see the story of "a man who could not make up his mind." The fog obscures the setting and the characters, perhaps mirroring Hamlet's foggy judgment in the wake of his father's murder. Olivier represents the twisted, dark interior of Hamlet's mind in his sets: the stairs outside Elsinore are winding, endless; the heavy columns inside the castle are large and ominous and yet mobile, changing set-pieces.

Although it's clear from the costuming and hair that the film is set in the past, there is a timeless quality to the setting. It's an abstract representation of a kingdom, not a faithful recreation of medieval Denmark. Conversely, Almereyda's Hamlet is very much informed by, and connected to, its modern setting. Corporate America is represented by the "kingdom" of the Denmark Corporation, and Hamlet is plagued not only by the death of his father, but by the costs of modern living: he is alienated, and yet surrounded, seeking solace in technology. Ethan Hawke plays a tortured Hamlet. He doesn't have time to just sit in a chair and soliloquize like Olivier. Hawke's soliloquies and speeches take place in homemade movies, on answering machines, and in the aisles of Blockbuster Video. Almereyda's images outpace the lines of the text, but this is an accurate representation of modern society: we use smart phones with touch screens, we're surrounded by visual advertising, we watch TV more than we read books. Our experiences are mediated by technology, and so are Hamlet's. While Olivier uses fog to obscure, Almereyda uses the hard, glittering surfaces of Manhattan to reflect reality and position Hamlet in a kind of shiny, claustrophobic cage. Ophelia, as the softer love interest, is reflected (ominously) in water.

Student Essay #2

While it can be argued that both Olivier's and Almereyda's presentation of Hamlet are true in some sense to the character depicted in the original play; nevertheless, we the audience, are left with vastly different impressions of that character.

In Olivier's play, Hamlet's personality is fractured. To some, he appears to be raving mad; to his friend Horatio, he is nothing but reasonable; to Polonius, he is condescending; to the ghost of his father, he is irreverent; to Claudius, he is sharp-tongued and defiant; in solitude, he is ponderous, sullen, deeply introspective, seething with rage and conflicted. The Hamlet in Olivier's play is driven by abrupt mood changes and is consistent in the inconsistency of his actions. It hardly seems that he is mad at all. Rather, it appears that this madness is the true property of his character.

To a lesser extent, Almercyda's Hamlet is also affected by a fractured personality. Throughout the movie, however, the motivations driving him are far more consistent and his personality is more consistent as well. To put it simply, Almercyda's Hamlet is in despair over the unjust death of his father and the distasteful marriage of his mother and uncle. He presents himself as sullen and depressed throughout much of the film, occasionally letting slip expressions of anger, and carries himself in such a way whether in the presence of others or in solitude. In comparison with Olivier's Hamlet, Almercyda's character appears less wild, with his depression taming the fringes of his anger. And while it is doubtless that both characters are determined in their goals, it is Almercyda's Hamlet that seems more narrowly determined. While the events of being shipped off by his uncle and the duel with Laertes seem to be distractions to the end-goal of Almercyda's Hamlet, Olivier's Hamlet seems to revel in the glory of besting any person or circumstance that attempts to impede him.

In a basic sense, both characters are Hamlet-agents of vengeance against a great injustice. The vastly different interpretations of the characters give proof to the intricacy and complexity of Shakespeare's original.

Question 3: *Stagecoach* and "Last Stage to Lordsburg"

What makes "Last Stage to Lordsburg" a second-rate short story and *Stagecoach*, whose themes and characters are based on it, a masterpiece?

Student Essay #1

Ernest Haycox wrote Western stories. While I haven't read any except one, "Last Stage to Lordsburg," I can imagine him recycling material: the moon hanging above the barren desert, the sounds of coyotes in the hills, the Indian threat. His characters come from the heroes and villains of the American West: a prostitute, a gambler, a whiskey salesman. They're all flat stereotypes. Some don't even have names; they are just referred to by their professions. The story also lacks the nuanced social themes of "Ball of Fat"; Haycox can't make hypocrisy and shame resonate as well as de Maupassant.

But under the master direction of John Ford, the story's skeleton is fleshed with humor and drama, and the real pulse of human experience on the western frontier. It's a very American story, of redemption and second chances, especially for Dallas and Ringo, who start as underdogs and end riding off in a carriage together, like heroes. Ford takes Haycox's descriptions of glances and looks (which are sprinkled throughout the story so frequently it seems like some kind of tic), and slowly plays them out on screen in a way that is haunting, enchanting. When Ringo and Dallas share a look over the newborn, it is tender. When Luke gets word that Ringo's in town, the whole saloon stops to stare, and their gaze is concerned, foreboding. I don't remember what any of the Haycox characters look like, but I could recognize a *Stagecoach* character from a closeup of their eyes alone, which speaks to the power of film, as well as to the masterful direction of Ford.

Student Essay #1

Stagecoach, an American classic, used many plot points from last Stage to Lordsburg. However, what made this film great was Ford's usage of landscapes, strong non verbal interactions and well developed characters, which was what was lacking in Haycox's story.

In Last Stage to Lordsburg we got a quick overview of the characters. The story felt like far away third person point of view. We knew what the characters did before but didn't know their thoughts and feelings, so we couldn't become emotionally invested in the characters. I found the author telling us rather than showing and it felt very stale compared to the film. There was little tension and it never felt like a truly dangerous time, because just as we reached the climax of the story, it was quickly over.

In Stagecoach this film brought life to the character. Using visual elements like how Ringo was connected to the landscape either through a window or actually outside, showing Ringo's love for freedom and symbolizing the western mindset. The confinement of indoors was also effective in this film. The stagecoach was also always presented small compared to the landscape which made the characters almost insignificant. The nonverbal communications were by far the strongest of Ford's techniques. The glances between Dallas and the rest of the stagecoach were intensely uncomfortable and made Dallas extremely sympathetic. During the scene with the baby, which replaced Henriette's scene with the whiskey drummer, Dallas showed her maternal instinct, portrayed angelic in a soft, glowing light. Her interaction with Ringo both during conversation and non speaking showed a longing to be loved, to have a family and a normal life, which was now finally in reach. Even the gambler Hatfield had a larger personality and scenes where he was with Lucy showed a dark tone. At first he appears a bit dangerous, then kind, but then as he takes his last bullet and placed the gun at Lucy's head, he appeared like a villain again. No one other than the baby was innocent in the stagecoach, which was fitting that the director could play with the audience's emotions.