

Hamlet Through a Feminist Lens: Text, Film, and Audience Interpretation

Subject: English / Media Literacy

Grade: 11 English Pre-AP (Ontario)

Text: *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1 — Hamlet and Ophelia

Time: Approximately 75 minutes

Media Text: *Hamlet* (1996 film)

Overview

In this lesson, students apply a **feminist analytical lens** to a selected passage from *Hamlet* and compare their interpretation of the written play with its representation in film.

Students first review key ideas associated with feminist literary theory and then view the Hamlet–Ophelia scene from the 1996 film. Working collaboratively, they annotate the written passage through a feminist lens, paying particular attention to **gender, power, relationships, perspective and social expectations**.

The lesson also asks students to examine the film as a constructed media text. Camera distance, lighting, body language, performance and other filmmaking choices provide information that is not explicitly present in Shakespeare's text and can influence how audiences understand Hamlet, Ophelia and their relationship.

The lesson therefore develops two related understandings: **an analytical lens provides a framework through which audiences interpret a text, and the form in which we encounter a text can itself shape interpretation**.

This lesson is part of a sequence in which students apply different analytical lenses to *Hamlet*, including psychoanalytic, feminist and Marxist approaches.

Curriculum Connections

Reading and Literature

Students:

- make and explain increasingly subtle inferences about texts, supporting interpretations with well-chosen explicit and implicit evidence;
- extend their understanding by making connections among texts and their own knowledge, experiences and insights;
- analyse texts in terms of the information, themes, ideas and issues they explore.

Oral Communication

Students:

- use appropriate active-listening strategies during discussion and collaborative work;
- communicate information and ideas clearly and coherently for a particular purpose and audience.

Media Literacy

Students:

- analyse how media forms and techniques influence meaning;
 - consider how representations are constructed;
 - examine how different audiences may interpret the same text differently;
 - identify values and social messages communicated through media representations;
 - compare how meaning changes when a story is experienced through different media.
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Learning Goals

Students will:

- make and explain thoughtful inferences about *Hamlet* using specific textual evidence;
- apply a feminist analytical lens to a selected passage;
- examine gender, power and relationships within the interaction between Hamlet and Ophelia;
- analyse how film techniques influence the representation of Hamlet and Ophelia;
- compare the experience of reading a scene with viewing a film representation of it;
- recognize that an analytical lens is a **framework audiences use to interpret a text**, rather than an inherent characteristic of the text itself;
- communicate interpretations using appropriate literary and critical-theory terminology;
- collaborate with others to develop and support interpretations.

Success Criteria

I can:

- make an inference and support it with evidence from *Hamlet*;
 - apply a feminist lens to a passage;
 - identify questions of gender and power in Hamlet and Ophelia's interaction;
 - identify filmmaking choices that influence my interpretation;
 - explain how viewing the scene may produce a different interpretation from reading it;
 - listen to and build upon other interpretations;
 - explain my thinking using appropriate terminology.
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Materials / Preparation

Prepare:

- copies of the selected passage from *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1;
- access to *Hamlet* (1996), beginning at approximately **1:33:15**;

- projector and speakers;
- subtitles/captions enabled;
- student laptops or lined paper for note-taking;
- markers/highlighters for annotation;
- feminist-lens pre-reading;
- feminist-theory review materials;
- annotation instructions;
- paper or digital space for the final individual response.

Students should complete the assigned feminist-lens pre-reading before the lesson.

Minds-On

Approximately 10 minutes

Return to the central question from the students' pre-reading:

How does a feminist lens change the way we understand people, power and relationships in a text?

Invite students to recall important ideas from the reading.

Clarify that a feminist lens is an **analytical tool or framework**. The goal is not to determine whether *Hamlet* "is a feminist text," but to investigate what becomes visible when readers deliberately examine the text through questions about gender, power, representation and social structures.

Review essential feminist concepts and terminology students will need for the analysis.

Students may take notes digitally or by hand.

Media Literacy Analysis: Viewing Hamlet and Ophelia

View the Hamlet–Ophelia scene from *Hamlet* (1996).

Students have encountered the scene previously, so this viewing asks them to look more deliberately at **how the film constructs the interaction**.

Students may follow the film using subtitles or the printed Shakespearean text.

After viewing, discuss:

- How might the film position Ophelia visually?
- What might lighting and camera distance suggest about the characters or their relationship?
- What might the actors' body language communicate, and how?
- How might performance choices affect our perception of Hamlet?
- How might they affect our perception of Ophelia?
- How might the director influence audience sympathy?

- Whose perspective seems to be centred?
- What might the film communicate that is not explicitly stated in Shakespeare's text?

Emphasize that the film does not simply "show us what Shakespeare meant." The filmmakers and performers have made **representational choices** that construct a particular version of the scene.

Diagnostic / Review of Understanding

Before students begin their collaborative annotation, briefly check their understanding of the feminist lens.

Ask students to identify the kinds of questions a reader might ask when applying this lens.

For example:

- Who has power in this interaction?
- How is that power expressed?
- Whose perspective is centred?
- What expectations are placed on Hamlet and Ophelia because of gender?
- How much agency might Ophelia actually have?
- What assumptions about men, women and relationships appear in the scene?

Use student responses to clarify misconceptions before moving into the annotation activity.

Collaborative Annotation Activity

Students work in pre-determined groups to annotate the selected *Hamlet* passage through a feminist lens.

Before beginning, co-create an **annotation legend** with the class. Students may use colour-coding, symbols, highlighting or written notes to identify different aspects of the passage.

Groups look for evidence related to:

- gender expectations;
- power and control;
- Ophelia's agency;
- Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia;
- whose perspective is represented or privileged;
- assumptions about relationships between men and women;
- social expectations surrounding gender;
- connections between the characters' interaction and larger social structures.

Students should support interpretations with specific evidence from the text.

Teacher Role

Circulate and conference with groups.

Possible prompts include:

- Whose perspective is centred here?
- How might power operate in this interaction?
- What evidence supports that interpretation?
- What does the feminist lens help you notice?
- How might another reader interpret this differently? Explain.
- Might you be responding to something actually present in Shakespeare's text, or to something you remember from the film?
- What might the film add that the written passage leaves open?

Provide clarification and additional scaffolding as needed.

Performance / Assessment

Assessment FOR Learning

Use observation, questioning and conferencing during discussion and collaborative annotation to assess:

- understanding of feminist literary theory;
- ability to apply an analytical lens rather than simply label the text;
- quality of textual inference;
- use of textual evidence;
- ability to distinguish between the written text and the film's representation;
- participation in collaborative interpretation.

Use this information to inform subsequent work with other analytical lenses.

Assessment AS Learning

Students reflect on their developing understanding.

Possible questions:

Which annotation made by your group might best reflect a feminist interpretation of *Hamlet*, and why?

What did you learn about applying a feminist lens that you did not understand before?

Assessment OF Learning

An individual written response provides evidence of each student's ability to apply feminist literary theory and communicate an interpretation clearly using evidence.

Consolidation: Reading Versus Viewing

Approximately 10 minutes

Students individually respond to:

How is this scene different when read versus viewed?

Encourage them to consider not simply what is different, but **why the difference matters to interpretation**.

Students might consider:

- acting;
- facial expression;
- body language;
- camera position and distance;
- lighting;
- sound;
- pacing;
- physical positioning of the characters;
- audience sympathy.

Return to the central idea:

When the medium changes, what happens to our interpretation?

The written play leaves many performance decisions open. A film production must make those decisions, creating one particular representation from among many possibilities.

Media Literacy Connections

This lesson combines **learning *through* media while learning *about* media**.

Students learn ***through* media** because both the written play and film support their understanding of Shakespeare, critical theory and the Hamlet–Ophelia relationship. Film provides an additional access point to Shakespearean language and dramatic action.

Students learn ***about* media** when they examine how the film constructs its own representation of the scene and consider how medium, filmmaking techniques and audience experience influence interpretation.

Media Construct Versions of Reality

The film constructs a particular version of Hamlet.

Shakespeare provides dialogue but comparatively limited stage direction. The film therefore makes numerous choices about performance, setting, camera position, lighting, physical distance and body language.

These choices can encourage audiences to understand the characters in ways that are not dictated by the written text.

Audiences Negotiate Meaning

A feminist lens provides one framework through which an audience can interpret the scene, but it is not the only possible interpretation.

Students bring their own knowledge, experiences and assumptions to both the play and the film. Collaborative annotation makes these differences visible as students compare interpretations and negotiate meaning with their peers.

Using other analytical lenses with the same passage can reinforce this concept: **the text remains the same, but the interpretive framework changes what the audience notices and emphasizes.**

Media Communicate Values Messages

Both the written play and film communicate ideas about:

- gender;
- power;
- relationships;
- expectations of men and women;
- acceptable behaviour;
- agency and control.

Students examine the values and assumptions embedded in the interaction between Hamlet and Ophelia rather than treating the interaction as neutral.

Media Have Social and Political Implications

A feminist analysis moves beyond the behaviour of two individual characters.

Students consider how the interaction may reflect larger social structures, particularly expectations surrounding gender and power in the world represented by the play.

This allows students to connect personal relationships within the text to broader social structures.

Form and Content Are Closely Related

A written play and a film can communicate the same narrative differently.

In the written text, readers imagine tone, facial expression, physical distance and movement. Film makes these choices visible and concrete.

Students therefore investigate how **form shapes content and audience interpretation.**

Accessibility / Adaptations

The lesson provides multiple access points to a challenging Shakespearean text.

Multiple Representations

Students encounter the scene through:

- the written text;
- film;
- subtitles/captions;
- oral discussion;
- direct instruction;
- collaborative annotation.

Visual and Auditory Access

- Enable captions during film viewing.
- Keep printed copies of the passage available.
- Display instructions, learning goals and discussion questions visually.
- Provide visual note-taking cues.
- Keep important feminist terminology visible for reference.
- Ensure the teacher remains visible while speaking where possible.

Flexible Participation

Students may:

- take notes digitally or by hand;
- annotate using notes, symbols, highlighting or colour-coding;
- develop interpretations collaboratively before responding independently;
- use the co-created annotation legend as a scaffold.

Mixed-readiness groups can provide peer support, while teacher conferences allow for additional clarification and prompting.

The progression from **pre-reading** → **explicit instruction** → **viewing** → **collaborative analysis** → **individual response** provides repeated opportunities to encounter and apply the central concepts.

Teacher Reflection

A central challenge in teaching critical theory was helping students understand that an **analytical lens is a tool for interpretation rather than an inherent property of a text**.

Students can sometimes speak as though a work is inherently feminist, Marxist or psychoanalytic. Teaching *Hamlet* through a sequence of different analytical lenses helped address this misconception. Students could see that the same text can generate different questions and interpretations depending upon the framework an audience applies.

Introducing feminist theory presented another challenge. Feminism encompasses a large and complex history, making it difficult to provide students with sufficient theoretical background within a single period. A pre-reading and common guiding question helped establish a shared foundation before students began applying the lens.

The incorporation of film produced an especially valuable media literacy opportunity. Film was initially included partly to improve accessibility and comprehension of Shakespearean language. However, students began drawing on the film's characterization of Hamlet and Ophelia when discussing the written text.

This revealed an important distinction. Shakespeare provides relatively little stage direction, while actors and filmmakers must make explicit choices about expression, movement, positioning, tone and visual presentation. The film was therefore not simply illustrating the written scene—it was **constructing a particular interpretation of it**.

Rewatching the scene after close textual analysis allowed students to identify information and interpretations introduced by the film. This became a productive demonstration of the Media Literacy Key Concept that **media construct versions of reality**.

Ideally, this work could be extended across several lessons to provide more time for feminist theory and comparison among representations. A further extension could have students **perform the scene themselves**. Students could then compare reading, film viewing and live performance and consider how their classmates' choices about voice, movement, expression and staging produce yet another interpretation of the same text.