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Film as *Film*: Additional Movies and Literary Theories for Classroom Use

Editor's note: The following text supplements the article, "Film as *Film*: Using Movies to Help Students Visualize Literary Theory" (*EJ* 95.3 [2006]: 32–38). Because of space limitations in the print journal, we chose to publish these additional films to the Web as an "EJ Extension."

The possibilities for studying literary theories through film as *film* are endless. With so many cinematic techniques, teachers and students alike can constantly interpret new meanings in a film's moving text. In the following list of films, I present examples of appropriate literary terms, theories, and commonly studied literary time periods that can be examined through each film's use of cinematic technique.

Field of Dreams

Dir. Phil Alden Robinson. Perf. Kevin Costner, Amy Madigan. Universal Studios, 1989.

Rated PG, *Field of Dreams* can be used to teach New Criticism through a study of symbolism, motifs, lighting, and other cinematic techniques. The film uses these techniques to highlight the priceless nature of family, the timelessness of baseball as an American tradition, and the importance of believing what cannot be understood. Students can examine how techniques work together to achieve these unified themes. For example, one of the first scenes begins with a wide-angle shot of golden rays of sunlight filtering from the clouds onto the cornfields of Iowa, where protagonist Ray lives. This shot suggests a higher purpose being cast for the cornfields. After Ray hears his first "voice" from beyond, he is shown tightly framed by a group of conservative farmers as they criticize him for hearing—and listening to—voices. Ray is often shot from behind windows—either looking out or looking in. By "trapping" Ray within these confining visual structures, these framing techniques all work to contrast Ray's belief in the dream of the baseball field with the practical beliefs of the farm community. By contrasting Ray—and later his family—with the prac-

tical concerns of farming, the film suggests that Ray is guided by faith rather than logic. Similarly, close-ups in the film highlight the bond between father and daughter or husband and wife. Even in extreme wide shots, we see Ray's daughter and wife in the background as he labors after his dream. The film works to create symbols joining cornfield/heaven (through well-lit and high-key lighting) and past/present (through juxtaposition, cutaways to old photos, and flashbacks). These symbols help the film portray baseball as a dream that spans generations, making sense as its own complete work regardless of outside knowledge or influence.

Gladiator

Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Russell Crowe, Joaquin Phoenix. Universal Studios, 2000.

Though rated R for graphic combat scenes in the gladiatorial arena, noncombat scenes can be used to teach symbolism and archetypal theory.

Symbolism: The use of cutaways, serene music, and colored lighting filters throughout the movie reinforces the idea of Elysium (heaven) as a golden field and a desirable place that will eventually be populated by protagonist Maximus and his beloved—and slain—wife and son. The serene, dreamlike quality achieved by such cinematic techniques contrasts Elysium with the reality of the violent world Maximus faces, which is often shown in harsh, bright lighting.

Archetypal theory: Students can trace the use of cinematic techniques to show Maximus's journey through many stages of the monomyth. For example, when Maximus is taken into slavery, a dramatic high-angle shot is used to film the weakened Maximus being carried on a stretcher. We see the hot, rocky desert soil moving quickly beneath the stretcher, reinforcing the

idea of movement. In this case, the movement is into the next stage of the journey, crossing the threshold into the initiation stage, where Maximus must face the trainers who cull the able gladiators from the new group of slaves. At the film's end, the use of filtered lighting and serene music cues the viewer that Maximus has traveled through all stages of the journey and has arrived at his final destination, and though in Elysium, Maximus has the freedom to live with his beloved family.

Pleasantville

Dir. Gary Ross. Perf. Tobey Maguire, Reese Witherspoon. New Line Cinema, 1998.

This film is rated PG-13 and can introduce students to a study of semiotics. When the protagonist gets trapped within a traditional 1950s-style television show, the film changes from color to black-and-white. As the film progresses, colored portions begin to appear in shots, representing freedom and individual thought characteristic of the present day, when experiencing emotions is acceptable, while the black-and-white aspects of the shots represent more-conformist values of ages past, when personal emotions were kept hidden. Later in the film, certain characters change to color, while more conservative, closed-minded characters remain in black and white, eventually creating a rift between colorful characters and grayscale ones. For example, the protagonist, who leans towards conservative values and has been black-and-white for most of the film, suddenly turns colored after defending his "mom" from bullies. Students can note the specific significance of color (or lack thereof) and evaluate the significance of color as a language of its own acting to create meaning and characterization in the film.

Sleepy Hollow

Dir. Tim Burton. Perf. Johnny Depp, Christina Ricci. Paramount, 1999.

While rated R for mildly gruesome violence, portions of this film offer excellent visuals to accompany a reading of Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" and can be used to illustrate mood and Romanticism. Dim pictures and low-key lighting emulate the dark quality created in the story. In addition, the film uses bold, powerful colors to contrast the protagonist's mother (a suspected witch) with the more Puritan values of his conservative father, who is shown in dark, washed-out black and white. Another motif shown throughout the film is the optical illusion disk Crane carries—a bright red bird on one side and a cage on the

other. When twirled quickly, the disk gives the illusion of a caged bird; Crane and Katrina discuss whether this illusion is magic or science. Through this study of color and lighting, the film can be used to illustrate Romanticism: imagination over reason.

Thelma and Louise

Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Geena Davis, Susan Sarandon. MGM, 1991.

Rated R for some sexual and violent content, the film contains scenes—appropriate for most high school classrooms—in which camera angles and choice of shot can be used to illustrate aspects of feminist criticism. The two female protagonists decide to leave their passive female roles and end up shooting a man (albeit partially in self-defense) and being chased by the law. Teachers can choose from many scenes that portray the women in tight camera angles, framed by doorways or interior structures. In these scenes, the women are often "trapped" not only by the tight camera framing but also by society's roles for them. In contrast, while on the road, away from the bounds of traditional society, the women are shot in wide angles, driving toward the open horizon. In these scenes, the women are no longer trapped by camera or society. Selected scenes from *Thelma and Louise* would complement a study of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" in an examination of traditional gender roles and feminist criticism.

What Dreams May Come

Dir. Vincent Ward. Perf. Robin Williams, Cuba Gooding Jr. Polygram, 1998.

Rated PG-13, this film uses lavish visuals to portray conceptions of heaven and hell different from many stereotypical notions of the afterlife. Because the film is so complex in its use of lighting, colors, framing, symbols, characterization, and flashback, it opens itself to a study of impressionistic criticism. A study of *What Dreams May Come* would necessarily value what the viewer thinks, and when the viewer is finished, the ultimate impression of the work is a personal one. For example, the wide-angle shots of the underworld conform to traditional views of hell, but the close-ups reveal that souls in hell are tormented not by a judgmental creator, but by their own conflicted selves. Thus, the film's juxtaposition of stereotypical settings with novel ones invites the viewer to find his or her own meaning. As another example, the changing—and lavish—scenery in "heaven" is accentuated by awe-inspiring, wide-angle shots featuring brilliant colors and lighting. Since

each character in this film's heaven creates his or her own setting, students can untangle complex characterization to determine the meaning of the symbolic scenery. The film is complex enough that no two interpretations will be the same.

In addition, characters in the afterlife often take on the bodies of different people, though their core personalities are the same. At one point, one of the characters notes that by taking a different bodily

form, stereotypical and expected roles no longer get in the way of two people interacting. Students can examine this complex characterization, determining how physical appearance affects our perception of a person or character. Since the film is complex—and because important details are withheld until the end of the film—a study of impressionistic criticism through this film would only be possible if students were able to view the film in its entirety.

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