

F I L M
EDUCATION

THE
SHIPPING NEWS
DIVE BENEATH THE SURFACE



BEFORE YOU SEE THE FILM

Based on Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Shipping News* traces one man's, Jack Quoye (KEVIN SPACEY), extraordinary journey to self-discovery when he returns to his ancestral home on the coast of Newfoundland.

After the death of his estranged wife (CATE BLANCHETT), his fortunes begin to change when his long lost Aunt (JUDI DENCH) convinces Jack and his daughter to head north. Now, in a place where life is as rough as the weather and secrets are as vast as the ocean, he lands a job as a reporter for the local paper. In the course of his new career, he begins to discover some dark family mysteries and finds friendship and love with a single mother (JULIANNE MOORE) who has a secret of her own.

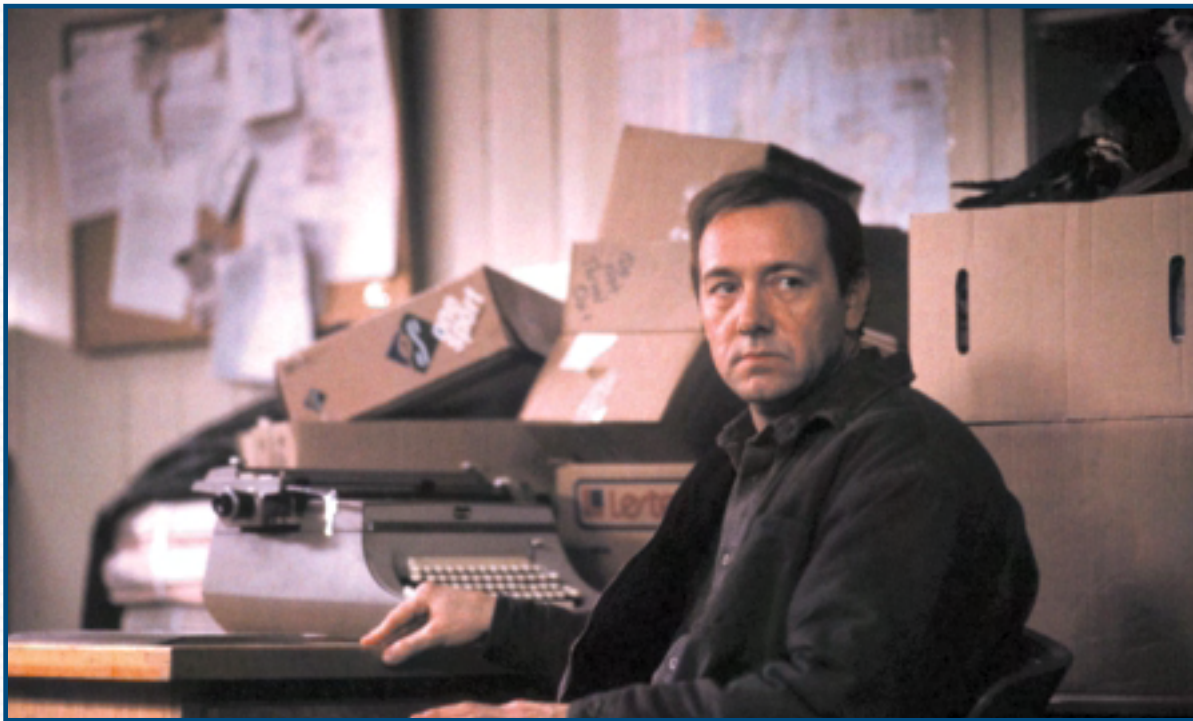
Publicity Notes for The Shipping News

Above is a brief description of the plot of *The Shipping News*. read it carefully. What are the key elements of the story that are stressed in this description? Can you sum up what the film will be about in one sentence? What genre do you think the film falls into?

When you have decided on the genre of *The Shipping News*, you will be able to start listing what your expectations of that genre would be. Who are the kind of characters you would expect to find in the genre? What would be typical events and situations?

An audience for these films will have an **expectation** of what they are going to see whilst they would also hope that these expectations might also be changed - we watch similar films which are all slightly different within a genre.

However, you may have decided that the film does not fit into any one particular genre. Look at the image below - Jack Quoyle (Kevin Spacey), the main character in the film/story. On an initial look, would you say that the character you see would be the **hero** of the story?



TASK

In the chart below are four typical characters from a story. Write down the qualities you would expect each to have (student sheet 6, see image bank).

Hero	Heroine	Bad Character	Supporter

student sheet 6

AFTER YOU HAVE SEEN THE FILM

Now that you have seen the film, you can check back to the work that you did beforehand and see how right you were in your predictions. How similar was *The Shipping News* to other films that you have seen in this genre, or novels that you have read?

TASK

While the film is fresh in your mind write an outline of the story, being as brief as you can. Do not lose this piece of work as you will need it later on.

What you have written above is a series of events that happened in the film. Are you sure that as you were watching the film, you also formed opinions about the characters? You may have preferred certain characters to others. Also, you will probably have thought about the reasons why they acted in the way they did.

Let us now see whether it is possible to put these ideas into some sort of shape. In groups, discuss the following questions with one person writing down any conclusions that you come to.

- Why do you think Jack was attracted to Petal?
- Why do you think Jack agrees to go to Newfoundland?
- Why did Aunt Agnes want Jack and Bunny to go with her?
- What did you think Aunt Agnes' secret was?
- How are children important in the story?
- Why do you think Jack is attracted to Wavey Prouse?
- Why do you think Jack believes that he is not a 'water person'?
- What makes Jack a good reporter?
- How important is the sea in the film?
- How are events from the past represented in the film?
- What does this tell us about Jack's development as a character?
- How does Jack's character change throughout the course of the film?

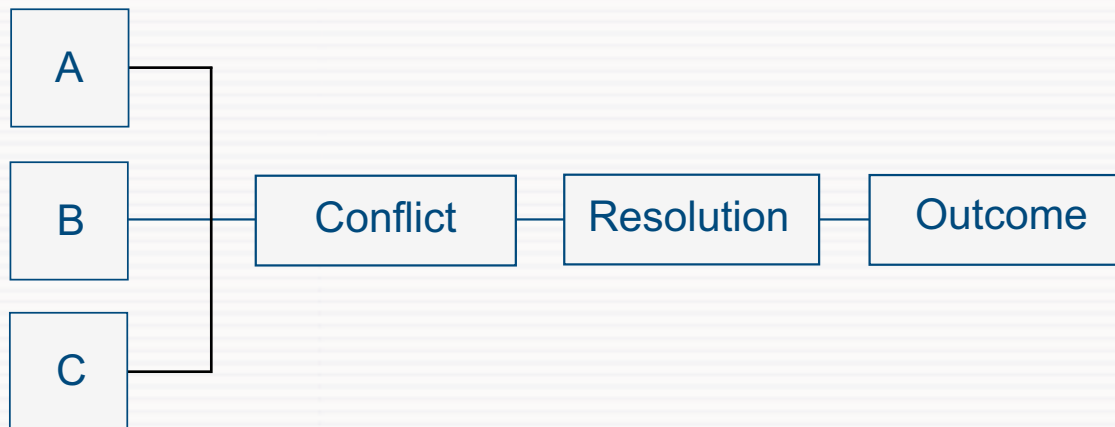
When your group has suggested some ideas from these questions, see how similar they are to the ideas in other groups.

You may find that each group has suggested similar answers to some questions, but very different answers to others. Why do you think this is? Why do you think you might have reacted to the characters in a different way?

As an audience, you all saw the same film. How was it you understood it in different ways?

THE CENTRE OF THE STORY - THE BEATING HEART OF IT

Certain critics and theorists of film and literature have analysed thousands of stories and have proposed a theory that all stories have a similar structure. They have said that the standard narrative structure of both novels and films can be simply expressed in the following way.



A, B and C represent characters or situations which we meet at the outset of the narrative and who come into some sort of conflict. During the story this conflict is resolved.

This is, of course, a crude oversimplification, but in most cases we are hooked by our desire to **see what happens next** - we await the resolution. We meet the characters, observe their situation and conflict and eventually things are sorted out to our (and normally their) satisfaction. Different types of story have different **resolutions**. A **tragic** love story will have a different **resolution**, to a love story (with a happy ending). Often, the conflict is between two characters.

- What conflicts face the characters in *The Shipping News*?
- What conflicts is Jack faced with?
- What conflicts is Aunt Agnes faced with?

Ask this question about other characters in the film.

TWO WORLDS

If a narrative works on the conflict between two sides, then in *The Shipping News* we can see a conflict between two different worlds, Jack's persona in New York and in Newfoundland and we see a conflict between Jack's past and present.

TASK

In the chart below (student sheet 7, see image bank) there are two worlds set out and the ways in which they are presented in the film - both through the characters and also through the settings.

Write descriptions in each box of the chart below which describe the worlds that the audience are shown in *The Shipping News*. You need only write down individual words if you wish or, if you prefer, slightly longer descriptions.

Film Education Digital Resource Spring 2002		SHIPPING NEWS	
Student Sheet 7 Two Worlds Chart			
	Jacks World	Newfoundland	
Men			
Women			
Home			
Lifestyle			
Dress			

student sheet 7

DWELLING ON THE PAST - MAKING A FUTURE

One can say that all stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. However, *The Shipping News* tells us not only what happens in **the present** but also what has happened in **the past** as Jack Quoye learns about his ancestors in Newfoundland.

The relationship of the recent, as well as the distant past to the present, is key to the development of Jack Quoye. One could say that the story we see unfolding in *The Shipping News* is one of character as opposed to action. What are the key moments in the film that help explain Jack's character and also how he changes? Write a list of all the key moments in the story that you think illustrate the ways in which Jack changes.

Begin by describing Jack in the opening of the film and then at the end of the film. Then start noting the various incidents which happen to him during the course of the film and explain how these reflect the ways in which change occurs.

First of all, think about Jack's relationship with the other characters that we meet in the film: Petal, Bunny, Aunt Agnes, Wavey Prouse, Jack Buggit and Tert Card. Explain how his relationship with these characters changes or influences the way he feels about himself.

You might then wish to think about his relationship with some of the minor characters in the film.

Finally, how do his ancestors and their actions affect him? How does his discovery of his past help him to change?



FILM LANGUAGE

So far you have discussed *The Shipping News* from the point of view of what it was about and the way in which the story was constructed. The ideas about the characters that you have discussed will have shown that you understand what was happening in the film. The film has **communicated meanings** to you. How did it do this?

When we are sitting in a cinema we see images on a screen and hear the soundtrack of the film. As we watch, the images and sound appear to arrive as if from nowhere, suddenly created for us, the audience. We know, of course, that both are recorded on celluloid. The recording, the shooting of the film, has been carefully planned however. Nothing that we see on a screen happens by chance. The dialogue, the sound effects and the music we hear have all been carefully chosen. Everything in the frame of the screen has been carefully selected. Costumes, locations, objects, even the actors have been chosen to fit in with the storyline of the film.

Earlier, you were asked to give the qualities of the main characters including the romantic hero and heroine. You were able to do this because they had been chosen to fit with our concept of what a romantic hero and heroine should be like.

MISE EN SCÈNE

As we have said, everything is put on screen to give us ideas about what is happening or to create a mood and atmosphere. Everything could have been shot in a very different way by the Director. Mise en scène is a term which is used to describe just that - it is French for **put in the scene**.

TASK

Look at the two stills on page 9 from *The Shipping News*. As everything has been **put in the scene** for a purpose, can you say what the purpose is? Why have the scenes been shot in this way? Why have certain objects been placed in the shot? What do these objects tell us about the characters, their way of life, their relationship to each other? How does the way that they are dressed tell us something about the characters? Why are the characters positioned in this way? What message is their body language conveying?

Our understanding can come not only from the items listed above, but also from the settings of the various scenes and the way that the characters are placed within the settings.



THE FILM AND THE BOOK

What **are** the differences between reading a story in a book and **reading** a story from a film? For example, how do we get our information about character from a book and how do we get this information from a film? How long does it take us, on average, to read a book compared to how long it takes us to watch a film? List as many differences as you can think of.

Reading a book is a solitary experience. Our imaginations must work with the author's narrative as the story unfolds. The image we form of the characters and events could well be different from that formed by a friend who has read the same book.

When we go to the cinema it is usually in the company of other people and everyone sees the same actors, the same settings and locations. There is more of a chance, then, that the audience's interpretations of what they see will be similar. If the film we are watching has been adapted from a novel, we are viewing the director's interpretation of the story.

However, there is always the possibility that some of the audience will read what they see in a different way from that intended by the Director. This will be the difference between a **preferred reading** and a **differential reading**. Can you think of any examples where a person might not read what they see in the **preferred** way? For example, they might not see the depiction of Newfoundland as the tough, uncompromising place that it should be.

Anyone could be forgiven for thinking it a fairly simple task to transfer from one medium to another. In a film, there are no lengthy descriptions of people and places to contend with. The camera acts as a universal eye showing us each character and location, be it a house, an apartment, an office, ocean liner or spaceship. We do not need to use our imaginations. However, we are still actively involved in reading, working out what the images are suggesting, working out our expectations of what will happen.

Dialogue is another area that has to be changed. In a book we occasionally have to retrace our steps to check whether we are sure which character is speaking. In a film, we know instantly who is speaking at any given moment and even if we cannot see them we recognise their voices. We can also gauge from their tone what mood they are in, whether they are angry, sad, amused or good-natured.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

When authors write novels/stories they deal with much more than just the storyline. By analysing a passage from a novel in a particular way one can find out something about the way the story was written and the choices the author has made in creating that story.

This is useful if you want to adapt the text for another medium than that of film. A scriptwriter must decide what choices a Director might make in transforming the narrative into dialogue and images.

Read the opening two pages of the novel *The Shipping News* (Annie Proulx, Fourth Estate £7.99) and do the following:

- Underline the action (the things that people do).
- In the left-hand margin, write down or make notes on what you learn beyond the action. This might be what you learn about the characters, the setting, the atmosphere, previous events and so on.
- In the right-hand margin, write down or make notes on anything you notice about the way the story is written. Use the following questions for guidance:
 - Through whose eyes is the story told?
 - Does the story change pace - go slowly or speed up?
 - What kinds of writing are used for dealing with actions, setting, conversation?
 - In what ways do you learn about the characters?
 - How does the author emphasise aspects of the story?

FROM WORDS TO PICTURES

Now you have seen how an author has constructed the narrative in a book, imagine you are a scriptwriter and attempt adapting the text to become a filmscript.

Consider what kinds of opening shots you would need to capture the atmosphere, convey the setting, portray the characters etc.? How would you use sound? Do you need to write more dialogue?

Devise a storyboard for the opening of the novel. Below are some of the choices which you will have to make.

TYPE OF SHOT

- MS (medium shot)
- CU (close-up)
- MLS (medium long shot)
- LS (long shot)

DURATION IN SECONDS

LIGHTING & COLOUR

- natural lighting
- use of light and shade

Choices Within A Shot

CAMERA ANGLE

- high angle
- low angle
- neutral angle

CAMERA MOVEMENT

- no movement
- pan
- tilt
- track

LENS MOVEMENT

- no movement
- zoom in
- zoom out

FOCUS AND DEPTH OF FIELD

- sharp focus
- soft focus
- out of focus
- variable focus

Note: a shot is any length of film recorded by the camera without interruption i.e. from the time you set the camera running to the time you stop the camera running **or** that part of a shot which the Editor selects for the final edited sequence.