

# SYRIANA

Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* is a complex thriller. The film concerns itself with an extremely broad canvas, attempting to map the unsettling relationships between the American government, big oil companies and Middle Eastern politics. In doing so, Gaghan establishes a distinctly uncomfortable link between terrorism and the self-interested policies pursued by the U.S.A.

*Syriana* is a demanding film, requiring some background knowledge. Several reviewers felt they were often trying to catch up with the intricacies of the plot. Most meant this as a compliment and it is to be hoped students will relish the opportunity *Syriana* offers to dip into distinctly murky waters. It is a film for older students at GCSE and AS/A2 Level. As well as the insights it provides about the clandestine side to international relations, it focuses on one of the key issues of our age, namely what the world's response will be as supplies of cheap oil diminish.

*Syriana* also provides ample material for media and film students and the brief notes here focus on narrative and characterisation.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

### **Key Stage 4**

Citizenship – 1a, 1e h-i; 2a-c; 3a-c (research/act on minimising environmental footprint)

English – (En1): 1; 2; 3. (En2): 4a-d; 5a-d. (En3): 1e-h – writing to inform, explain, describe

Geography – development; factors affecting development in emerging nations; human geography: factors affecting poverty, exploring the spatial, political, social, economic, environmental and temporal dimensions of human existence and in addressing issues of concern to humanity in the past, present and future

Media Studies – narrative; representation; detailed study of a film

RE – 1a-b,e; 2a-d

### **AS/A2**

Economics – markets; international trade

Geography – development; factors governing industrial development; personal study

### **Scottish Curriculum**

English – D-F

Environmental Subjects (Social Subjects) – D-F

Religious and Moral Education – D-F

## FURTHER RESEARCH

A film like *Syriana* opens up some extremely complex issues.

You can read more about these issues on the BBC News - Oil

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/5294586.stm>) , Arabic News Politic Report

(<http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Weekly/Politics/20060828.html>) and The

Guardian (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/oil/0,,608464,00.html> <http://>) websites.

## BACKGROUND

Examine the following statements. Come up with as many problems or challenges that they might pose to the population and government of the United States of America.

- A quarter of the world's oil is consumed in the USA.
- The U.S. consumes 30 billion barrels of crude oil a year but only produces four billion barrels from its own oil fields.
- The U.S. population is only 5% of the world's total population.
- Americans are used to cheap oil and petrol prices – its economy is reliant on the car and on road and air transport.
- Oil prices are currently calculated in dollars, giving the U.S. a significant trading advantage.
- Although Saudi Arabia has some 25% of the world's remaining oil reserves there have been few new Saudi oil fields coming online in recent years. To date, Saudi Arabia's leaders have enjoyed a close relationship with the West, even permitting U.S. soldiers to be based on its territory.
- While countries with oil resources can enjoy periods of enormous wealth, it is rare for these immense sums to filter down to 'ordinary' people. In countries such as Angola and Nigeria and in many parts of the Middle East oil revenues have been appropriated by the ruling elites or spent on arms or luxuries.
- The world's oil supply is vulnerable to disruption by external factors. The war in Iraq has significantly reduced that country's production and America's ability to ensure that it has first call on the supplies from other countries is far from guaranteed. Both Iran and Venezuela are far from being friends of the U.S.A. and are happy to trade with China or other powers.
- Increasingly, countries such as China and India are seeking oil to fuel their economic growth. There has been a 250% increase in world oil consumption since 1965.
- Chinese oil consumption is expected to grow by 7.5% a year for the next 20 years. In 2003 Chinese car sales hit 2 million – a 70% increase on the previous year. China has a population of 1.3 billion people.

'Syriana' is a term used by Washington think tanks to describe a 'democratic', Western-leaning, business-friendly Middle East most suited to U.S. commercial and political interests. In the film, it is the kind of term likely to be banded about at the meetings of the Committee for the Liberation of Iran - the shadowy organisation that brings neo-Conservative politicians and business people together to plot regime change in Iran.

What do you feel might be the danger (if any) of trying to force countries to accept 'U.S.-style democracy'?

Do you think it is justified for U.S., British or any other governments and their agents to do unpleasant and illegal things abroad in order to protect their own interests and preserve their authority in the world?

## THE NARRATIVE

Create your own character sketches (there are two examples below) of the main characters and consider the possible 'narrative arcs' they go through.

Bob Barnes (George Clooney) – a jaded CIA agent, well versed in Middle-Eastern 'realities' and cynical of his superiors and the politicians they answer to. He is an 'operative' – committed to getting jobs done without asking too many questions - until a missile he planned to destroy as a part of a plot to kill some arms-dealers falls into the hands of a mysterious 'green-eyed' Arab in Iran.

How does Bob Barnes 'grow' by the end of the film?

Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon) – a Geneva-based economist, who is offered the opportunity of a lifetime by Prince Nasir Al-Subaai –the eldest son of an ailing sheik, namely the chance to play a crucial part in the restructuring of Nasir's oil-rich country's economy once the Sheik, his father, dies. The only problem is that the initial offer arises from the tragic death of Woodman's son at a party held by the Sheik. Woodman is forced to choose between his family and his passionate desire to be a part of history.

How does Bryan Woodman 'grow' by the end of the film?

Following a viewing of the film summarise the following main plot strands.

1. The progress of the Connex-Killen merger.
2. The hope of a new beginning in the Middle East following Prince Nasir's bid for power and the forces that thwarted him.
3. The in-house power struggles that surround Bennett Holiday at his Washington-based law firm Sloan Whiting.
4. The slow recruitment of Wasim Khan to the cause of Islamic terrorism.

## HOW THE STORY FITS TOGETHER

Consider how effective *Syriana* is in establishing the links between the various strands of the story. Draw a diagram linking together the main elements of the plot and showing how they inter-relate.

Consider the effect of juxtaposition in the film when the story cuts from one story strand to another, often creating extremely uncomfortable overlaps. For example:

1. The cut from the scene in a plush hotel lobby where Bryan Woodman is commenting on how the rich Arabs manage to keep their clothes immaculately clean TO the first images of the Islamic School (37 minutes in); or
2. The cut from Dean Whiting (Christopher Plummer) in close-up having bullied Nasir's younger brother Meshal into accepting his help to put him on the throne TO CIA HQ in Langley, Virginia where a briefing against Nasir is underway (41 minutes in.)

### **Compromised Characters**

In interviews, George Clooney and director Stephen Gaghan have repeatedly argued that they did not want *Syriana* to be a film about goodies and baddies. In the same way that everyone is connected in the story, there is not one of the major characters without some kind of vulnerability or lacking the capacity to behave reprehensively.

- Draw up a list of characters and list the times at which they appear most and least sympathetic.
- What, for example, is the impact of the scene when the beleaguered Bob Barnes threatens Dean Whiting and all his family?
- How much sympathy do you feel for Barnes in the torture scene given his facility for violence? And what about Wasim – does he appear to be nothing but a dupe when agreeing to become a suicide bomber?

### **The Fruits of Power**

The characters in *Syriana* are playing for big stakes. Early on, Bennett Holiday has the idea that he might be able to afford a house in the Hamptons (an exclusive summer resort on Long Island) dangled in front of him if all goes well on the Connex-Killen merger. But despite the rich rewards on offer, there are few glittering prizes in the film that do not appear rather hollow on reflection. Look at the list below and consider whether or not these 'rewards' warrant the duplicity and human suffering that underwrites them.

1. Bryan Woodman staying in the luxury of a Middle Eastern hotel before meeting Prince Nasir (examine how his isolation is captured in a montage).
2. The ordinary middle-class family life that Barnes' boss enjoys when home from the 'office'.
3. Jimmy Pope's bizarre displacement of African animals to Texas for the sole purpose of providing him with something exotic to target with his rifle.

Written by Jerome Monahan © Film Education.