

TEACHERS' NOTES

Finding Forrester is a film about the inspirational relationship between a street-wise black teenager and a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist. This study guide is for pupils of GCSE and A level English and Media Studies.

The areas of study include starting points for creative writing, writing a critique, what makes great writing, representation and mise en scène.

SYNOPSIS

He was a vibrant personality who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning classic novel four decades ago. And that is the last word heard of William Forrester (Sean Connery). That is until Jamal Wallace (Rob Brown), a brash sixteen-year-old with writing aspirations of his own, cracks the veneer of Forrester's sheltered existence and re-ignites the dreams of this literary legend in the winter of his life.

Known as the neighbourhood recluse, silver-haired Forrester is a man whose mystery and eccentricity border on the mythical. When he discovers that Jamal - a talented African-American scholar-athlete who is recruited by an elite Manhattan school for his brilliance on and off the basketball court - has sneaked into his apartment and left his backpack full of writings behind, they both get something unexpected in return.

Forced to look past skin colour and suppositions, Jamal encounters not only his first fan, but a mentor who will challenge and change him forever, and Forrester has his first reason in years to emerge from his self-imposed solitude.

Visit www.columbiatrlstar.co.uk/forrester.htm for reviews and background information.

Director: Gus Van Sant

UK release date: 23rd February 2001

Certificate: 12

Running time: 137 mins

THE PULITZER PRIZE

Pulitzer was a Hungarian émigré who became a very successful journalist in America. He made a special bequest for the founding of a prize for excellence in the worlds of creative writing and journalism by American writers. This has since been extended to the fields of drama, music and poetry. Pulitzer wanted the potential prize-winners to have concentrated on an American theme but this was not obligatory. He also gave his panel of judges the option of not awarding a prize in a year where there was no suitable material.

Past Pulitzer Prize-winners have included John Steinbeck for *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ernest Hemingway for *The Old Man and the Sea* and Carol Shields for *The Stone Diaries*. Drama winners include Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

There are now many prizes awarded to the creative arts in all categories. They usually involve a large-scale awards ceremony with a sense of drama and suspense. As a result of winning, the prize-winner not only gains publicity for themselves but sales of their book or cinema attendance for their film can increase dramatically.

- *Why do you think awards ceremonies are often televised and can have huge worldwide viewing figures?*
- *Why do you think the Pulitzer Prize Committee deliberately announces its awards at a low-key luncheon which is not televised? What sort of kudos does winning a Pulitzer prize have? Had you heard of it?*

THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL

Forrester's novel, *Avalon Landing*, in the film is described as possibly the Great American Novel. Why do you think America wants to define itself with a novel? Does Britain feel the need to define itself in this way?

1. *Can you see any connection with winners or texts of the Pulitzer Prize? If you look on the Pulitzer Prize website there are names of all the winners and nominees listed by both year and category since 1917.*
2. *If the novel or play reflects the age in which it is written then why are there some years when the prize is not awarded and why are some of the winners writing about the past?*
3. *Much is made of Forrester's Scottish ancestry - and he is portrayed by Sean Connery as a very Scottish person. How does this fit in with the idea of his novel being very American and is there any connection with another Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Angela's Ashes* (Frank McCourt), the majority of which is set in Ireland?*

ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY

A central theme of the film is that the two main characters are writers. William Forrester is at the end of his career as an author and Jamal is at the beginning of his academic and athletic future. Forrester encourages the young man to write using different stimuli.

WRITING ABOUT YOUR INTERESTS AND EXPERIENCE

Forrester is not just interested in baseball, he is passionate about it. So much so that he is prepared to leave the house to go and watch the game and goes to the crowded stadium even though he is agoraphobic. He writes about the total experience of baseball because it is that total experience that he enjoys.

1. *What do you care deeply about? Could you write about it? For Jamal it is basketball, which is a different sport, but for you it could be something entirely different. Forrester suggests that the effect of the individual experience allows two people to view the same event with different eyes, viewpoint and reaction. This is what makes it possible for different writers to express themselves about the same event in entirely different ways. Take any event or experience and try it. It does not matter if someone else chooses the same event.*
1. *Forrester tells Jamal to write down on paper as quickly as possible his thoughts and emotions and then go back and re-write so that there is a real spontaneity of both ideas and expression.*

STARTING POINTS Forrester uses his own work as a starting point for Jamal.

A title. Finding Forrester is a title that has many possibilities. A plot of a good film can be explained in one minute. In a group, brainstorm as many possibilities for a film called Finding Forrester and then individually devise the one-minute summary of the film.

*A sentence. **'You need to know that while I knew so very early that you would realise your dreams, I never imagined I would once again realise my own.'** Use this as the starting point for a piece of writing or take the first sentence of any book or story and go in a different direction with the text.*

The meaning of the title of Forrester's book, Avalon Landing, is never fully explained. What does it mean to you and how would you begin the story?

CRITICISM Any exploration of a text involves criticism. Positive criticism can lead to real revelations about a text and well-written criticism can be inspiring text in its own right. Some famous writers, notably George Bernard Shaw, began their careers as critics. However, the attempts by critics, including Professor Crawford in the film, to understand and analyse Forrester's book drive Forrester into becoming a recluse and Crawford into bitterness.

1. *Write a critique of Finding Forrester. Establish the audience you are writing for and include both your reaction to the film and whether you would recommend it.*
2. *Find some reviews of the film. Do the writers agree with your opinion? Do they agree with each other? What does their work tell you about the audience for whom they were writing? How has the audience affected their opinion and the style of their work?*

A STUDY OF REPRESENTATION

THE ISOLATED CHARACTER

Jamal and Forrester have something in common; a fear of not being in control of their surroundings. For Jamal he lies about his academic abilities because he wants to be part of his peer group in school; for Forrester he copes by deliberately isolating himself from the public that loves his work and pay his bills.

Look at the following facts about Forrester. Fill in the equivalent facts about Jamal and then chart what happens throughout the film.

FORRESTER

1. does not want to leave his environment
2. has made his space his own
3. does not want to meet people
4. does not want to write another book
5. does not trust people
6. thinks Jamal is a thief
7. will not meet Crawford
8. has never admitted who is the hero of the book
9. has not been back to Scotland
10. is never wrong
11. has no friends

JAMAL

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.

WHAT HAPPENS



VISUAL REPRESENTATION

Literature has many examples of the recluse. In the work of Dickens there is Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations* stuck forever in the day of her jilted wedding and Crook in *Bleak House* who never throws anything away. Do you know of any other literary recluses? They are reclusive for a reason and often have to make difficult journeys of transformation, or perish. Their behaviour is often obsessive and visually they dress eccentrically. There are real-life recluses as well, often people who have been in the public eye and, like Forrester, have decided to cut themselves off from society.

How is Forrester visually represented? Is there anything unusual about his dress?

- *What do his neighbours think of him?*
- *How do you feel about the film's portrayal of his fears?*
- *How does the birdwatching connect to other aspects of Forrester's character? Why do you think Sean Connery chose it as a central trait?*
- *How is Jamal visually represented?*

It is the contrast of the visual clichés which makes the characters' development interesting.

- the talented basketball player
- the cool, black kid in his neighbourhood
- the middle-class academic student in his school uniform
- the young writer working with an inspired teacher

Look at the images below of Jamal and compare and contrast them. What decisions have the film makers made in creating these looks? Which of them seems to be the real Jamal? What are the expectations of him from:

- his mother and brother
- his friends
- Claire, his new friend at Mallow-Callow school
- Dr Spence, Claire's father
- Professor Crawford
- Forrester



'So many of America's greatest writer's, J D Salinger or Thomas Pynchon for example, were eccentric, reclusive types.

[In developing the character of Forrester] 'We made him more reclusive, more eccentric, more compassionate. This is a guy who is ingratiating on one page and infuriating on the next.'

Mike Rich, Screenwriter

MISE EN SCÈNE

Since all but a few of Forrester's scenes take place in his apartment, and the heart of the story is enacted there, this set assumed a great deal of importance. It is an extension of his character and helps define him.

'We wanted the apartment to look like a kind of Never Never Land to Jamal, who comes from a normal street environment and lives in cramped quarters. Because it had to carry so many scenes, we decided to make the apartment oversize, almost palatial, so that the camera could move around in it freely. Also, Sean Connery is a big man, so everything there - the chairs, the table, the bed, they're all oversize too.'

'We had to achieve 40 years of layering so that the apartment had the proper authentic texture. It wasn't supposed to be a fire hazard, you know, strewn with papers and all sorts of junk. On the other hand, it had to be crowded and filled with..., well, stuff The problem was to fill it with the right stuff.'

Jane Musky, Production Designer

- What did you notice about the 'stuff in the apartment e.g. the security, the decor, the televisions, the overall colour? How do you feel this fits in with the representation of Forrester?
- How does Forrester's apartment contrast with the look of:
 - Jamal's living space
 - Claire's living space



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