

TITUS

TEACHERS' NOTES

This study guide is aimed at students of English, Film and Media Studies at A Level, ETEC National and Scottish Higher Grade. The guide looks at: the adaptation of Shakespeare's text for screen, examining the question of genre, issues of representation and the characters and their connection to other Shakespearean texts.

SYNOPSIS

This comic tragedy begins with the great Roman general, Titus Andronicus (Anthony Hopkins) returning home victorious after a long and brutal war with the Goths. His first act is to ritually sacrifice the eldest son of the Goth Queen, Tamora (Jessica Lange), his prisoner. However, when the corrupt Saturninus (Alan Cumming) is made Emperor and surprisingly makes Tamora his queen, a new battle ensues as Tamora, and then Titus, enact a tale of double revenge.

Director Julie Taymor Certificate 18 Running time 162 minutes UK release date 1st September 2000

TITUS

'If William Shakespeare were alive today, he would be writing and directing movies. Julie Taymor's Titus offers a glimpse of what they might be like: challenging but accessible, tragic and comic, deeply responsive to the past yet highly relevant to the present.'

Titus, The Illustrated Screenplay, Jonathan Bate,
Newmarket Press New York, 2000

This powerful, contemporary version of one of Shakespeare's most notorious plays is an unrelentingly violent text. Titus contains macabre scenes of ritual sacrifice, rape, mutilation and cannibalism, as well as several murders. The playgoers of Elizabethan England, reared on bear-baiting and the public scaffold had strong stomachs for the violent action within the play, which is an exploration of revenge and the darker recesses of humanity. The themes, language and characterisation expressed in Titus Andronicus echo throughout Shakespeare's work making us aware that these are universal concerns, and as relevant today as they were in first performance five hundred years ago. For Julie Taymor the film speaks directly to our times. *'...a time whose audience feeds daily on tabloid sex scandals and high school gun sprees and where racism and ethnic cleansing have almost ceased to shock by being so commonplace.'*

TITUS AND GENRE

The best description of the play *Titus Andronicus* may be that of a revenge tragedy, a genre defined by a hero who relentlessly pursues vengeance and dies at the moment of triumph. Ever since the Greek tragedies, western playwrights have been concerned with the character of the revenger. He, or she, stands on a series of borderlines between an individual's accountability of their own conscience and the whole community's need for the rule of law, between the conflicting demands of justice and mercy. *Titus Andronicus* follows many conventions of the Elizabethan revenge play but Shakespeare may have been parodying, rather than imitating, a conventional Elizabethan revenge drama.

♣ Discuss the 'comic' elements in the film. How would you justify the inclusion of jokes about rape, mutilation and cannibalism in the film?

♣ Revenge tragedy, history play, political play, 'sword and sandal' epic, horror movie. How would you classify *Titus*? Discuss the film's generic attributes and arrive at a classification of the film.

TASK

'Titus is an arduous part. He is on stage almost continuously as heroic veteran, stoic parent, implacable devotee of barbarous pieties, crazy victim, adroit revenger.'

Evelyn Waugh (novelist)

♣ *Does Titus exhibit any growth or healing in the course of the film, or is he just a physical manifestation of revenge?*

♣ *Brian Cox was the first actor to bring Thomas Harris' cannibal psychopath, Dr Hannibal Lecter, to the screen in the film Manhunter. When Titus Andronicus was last performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company the central role was taken by Cox.*

♣ *Explain why you believe Anthony Hopkins may have been selected to play the role of Titus in the film.*

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

Titus is the film directorial debut of Julie Taymor who also wrote the screenplay. Taymor's version of *Titus* juxtaposes elements of the ancient world with contemporary styles and artefacts and Elliot Goldenthal's score, a skillful mixture of music from different eras, underpins the film's style. The film locates Rome at its very centre, offering a critique of Roman society; this begins with a request to Titus to 'set a head on headless Rome' (Act I, Scene I. Line 189 *Titus Andronicus*, The Arden Shakespeare Edition, Jonathan Bate, 1998) followed by the barbarous dismemberment of Tamora's son, Alarbus. As we subsequently witness heads, hands and tongues lopped off, we accept that Rome itself is being systematically deconstructed throughout the film.

- ❖ What is the effect of mixing old and new, for example the setting and costumes? To what extent does it help illuminate this classical text?
- ❖ How do the film's sets and locations reflect the physical and mental states of its main characters?
- ❖ How does the behaviour and appearance of the Roman troops prepare us for Titus' decision to support Saturninus and for his subsequent actions?
- ❖ What does Saturninus say which alerts the audience to his unsuitability for the role of Emperor? How is his unsuitability made clear by his appearance in the film? Contrast Saturninus' words and appearance with those of his brother, Bassianus.
- ❖ Titus has the strength of a mature adult but he lacks the flexibility of youth. The film *Titus* begins with the boy/Young Lucius playing with 'war toys', unaware that he will soon have to bear witness to Lavinia's rape and disfigurement and many other real horrors. It is through the eyes of Young Lucius that we confront the violence at the heart of Rome.
- ❖ Lavinia and Young Lucius are on screen for much of the film, although they speak very little. How does the film make use of these two eloquent, yet 'silent' witnesses?

TASK

- ❖ *How would you stage *Titus Andronicus* to make it appeal to a modern audience? Consider the resonance it might have with, for example, events in former Yugoslavia, mass murders in Rwanda or the rising crime rates of the industrialised western world. You should consider incorporating different media into your production, such as music videos, news footage, or images and text from the internet.*
- ❖ *Which contemporary events or personalities could you draw upon to emphasise the relevance of *Titus Andronicus* for a modern audience?*

CHARACTER AND CONNECTIONS

Titus resembles Coriolanus, another of Shakespeare's honourable Romans. Both characters are incapable of compromise, and adhere to rigid codes of honour long after they have ceased to have any validity in the worlds they have helped to create.

The play Titus Andronicus contains echoes of many of Shakespeare's later plays: A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice, Othello and The Tempest. However, it is Shakespeare's mature tragedy, King Lear, that has most in common with the early Titus Andronicus.

- ❖ Both plays feature grisly horrors.
- ❖ Both plays feature angry old men, acting on the basis of inflexible codes. However, whereas Lear 'develops' during the action of the play, Titus merely 'goes one better' than his enemies. Lear's madness is real. Titus claims that he has simply feigned madness.
- ❖ Both plays feature parties of 'good' characters ranged against the powerful and alluring forces of evil.
- ❖ In King Lear, Regan and Goneril are undone by their desire for Edmund as surely as Tamora is undone by her lust for Aaron.
- ❖ Aaron himself is certainly a precursor of many of Shakespeare's Machiavellian villains, such as Richard III, Shylock and - in particular - Iago.
- ❖ Aaron's delight in his malevolence not only recalls Shakespeare's future diabolic creation, Iago, but also the contemporary Machiavellians, such as Barabas and Lightbom of the dramatist, Christopher Marlowe, whose work was an enormous influence on the young Shakespeare.
- ❖ Murderous and barbaric black protagonists featured in several plays of that period and Shakespeare could easily have let Aaron remain an Elizabethan racist stereotype. Shakespeare however, is adept at playing on audiences' prejudices - as Iago does in Othello - only to later oblige them to radically revise their views.

TASK

- ❖ *To what extent is Aaron shown in the film to be more admirable than either Tamora or Titus?*
- ❖ *Discuss the role of Aaron in the film. Is there more to Aaron than pure villainy? What do we learn of Aaron's motivations in the film Titus? Is he an actual human character or more a representation of evil in a morality play?*

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