

Compare the opening sections of kenneth branagh's essay



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So exactly why is it that Hamlet is still so popular with our modern day audiences when it was written for the naive audiences of the 17th century? Personally I believe this is because Hamlet deals with many fresh issues including corruption, love and the supernatural, which still appeal to contemporary audiences. These issues are also present in many films made recently e. g. ' The Exorcist,' ' The Others' and ' Sixth Sense' all these films are also popular. Shakespeare's Hamlet is a play filled with revenge, ambition and faithlessness.

It was written in the 17th century though Shakespeare set it long before his own time. Hamlet is significant as the first of Shakespeare's four great tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth. People are still entertained by ordinary passions and ambitions with which a modern day audience can still identify and relate to. Hamlet is Shakespeare's longest play due to the fact that it has to deal with the complex and complicated moral dilemma the viewers find Hamlet facing, whether to avenge the death of his father or not.

There are many interpretations of Shakespeare's Hamlet, some say the Lion King is based on Hamlet and though there may not be a direct and obvious link there are many similarities, like the murder of the king for the uncle to take the throne. I've looked at two very diverse directors, who both interpret Hamlet's issues and moral dilemmas very differently. I have focused on Kenneth Branagh's and Franco Zeffirelli's versions of the play and analysed the obvious and hidden differences.

We see Branagh is very true to Shakespeare's opening yet Zeffirelli's makes up his own beginning and uses text from other parts of the play. At the very beginning of Branagh's version the viewers see the words ' William Shakespeare's' in a Bold, prominent red, which stands out against the black background. I think Branagh has used red because red has connotations with blood, murder and killing, and black with death and misery. Then we see the title ' Hamlet' which all together reads ' William Shakespeare's Hamlet'.

This is a clever way to introduce the play and is quite dramatic with good impact, it also suggests his version will stay very true and close to Shakespeare's true text. The camera pans from right to left across the word ' Hamlet'. This is unusual as we read left to right; this gives the beginning an interesting start. The word is engraved in a stone plinth, which looks like the bottom of a gravestone, in what seems like a traditional old English font typical to the era of the play. I think Branagh has done this purposely to quickly set the mood of the play.

As the camera lifts off the word Hamlet we see there is blue lighting across the driveway. I think he has used blue because blue gives the impression of a bleak, frosty, eerie night. There is no music or dialogue yet but the viewers can hear a bell tolling midnight, this is pathetic fallacy because midnight is associated with the inexplicable, mysterious and miraculous. We can also hear owls hooting, faint dogs barking and the wind whining. The camera finishes panning across the plinth and carries on across a large, old-fashioned house.

We see Branagh has decided to use a grand house and not a real castle, this suggesting a more modern setting. The camera eventually stops panning and the audience sees a medium angle shot of the stereotypical ghost story house, with two fire lamps flickering beside it creepily lighting up the house casting scary shadows. I think the lighting gives the house an even more phantasmal appearance. There still hasn't been any dialogue or character introduction yet. We see Branagh has used his opening seconds well to create a perfect atmosphere.

After we see the house, the camera cuts to a close up of a middle aged guard on sentry duties. The guard looks very on edge and the audience gets the feeling from his stance and his facial expression the guard is waiting for something or someone. All we can hear at this point is the creatures of the night shrieking and the guard's own footsteps. Next we get a montage of shots as the camera cuts to a medium angled shot of the horizon which we see as though we are looking through the guard's eyes. The sky is dreary and black, the plain bleak, misty and mysterious.

The camera cuts again to the guard who is now looking extremely edgy. We can see Branagh has again decided to concentrate on creating atmosphere rather than work on character building; this in turn produces more tension. The camera then cuts again to a statue's face, this is the statue stood on the plinth we saw at the start of the film. This tells us that this is a statue of old Hamlet whom is now dead. The statue is placed in front of the house which is glowing sinisterly behind it. This is a really atmospheric shot, it's unearthly and wicked.

Next an owl hoots and the guard jolts then abruptly turns to see where the sound has come from. Branagh is making it seriously obvious that the guard is on edge; even the most unaware viewer would notice the guard's anxiety. Next the camera pauses on the statue's face for a few brief seconds, again this is Branagh being clever, he is making us notice the statue. We see the edgy guard turning to face the statue and we get a montage of shots as the camera cuts from the dark shadowy statue to the weary guards face. The camera starts to pan down the statue's arm to show the audience the hilt of the statue's sword.

We then become aware of a new low sound which made me first think of stone gates opening, maybe the gates of hell and the statue being possessed. Suddenly the audience hears a sharp, harsh sound as we see the statue's sword pulled a couple of inches out of its scabbard. This is to make the audience jump really putting the audience into an unnerved state. All of a sudden we hear loud fear filled voices from the two guards who get introduced to us as Bernardo and Francisco. Bernardo jumps on Francisco as both guards identify themselves and their duties to one another.

This is the first dialogue in Branagh's film and seems to divert the attention immediately away from the statue and on to the guard's heated discussion. This makes the audience believe the statue moving is all in their imagination. It appears strange to me that a guard coming to relieve a fellow workmate is so on edge when he sees another person as he must be expecting to see someone else. Bearing this in mind I think Bernardo only jumps on Francisco because of the sound the statue's sword has made.

Maybe he thinks Francisco is about to draw his spear and attack him.  
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This scene is very true to Shakespeare's original text. Bernardo then inquires if Francisco has had a quiet watch this suggests he maybe expecting something unnatural and unearthly. Bernardo begins to relieve Francisco and asks if Francisco is to meet the other guard coming on watch that night that he bid them 'make haste'. After this we hear footsteps, both guards draw their spears and order the intruders to identify themselves. This shows that the guards are extremely on edge as they are approaching every moving object with caution.

The intruders are introduced to us as another guard, Marcellus and Hamlet's best friend Horatio. The next few seconds introduces Horatio, Marcellus, Francisco and Bernardo. Their dialogue tells us about the ghost and what they have seen before, we get close-ups as they speak and we find out that Horatio does not believe that this ghost exists. There isn't much character building as these characters are not very important to the entire make-up of the play. Francisco leaves and Bernardo settles down by a fire to tell us his story.

Marcellus and Horatio sit down by him to listen. Violin music starts as they take their places. The fire is lighting up the characters face's in a spooky way. This is pathetic fallacy as ghost stories are normally told around fires. As Bernardo starts the camera cuts to a view of the night's cloudless sky then back to Bernardo, we can see Marcellus and Horatio behind him their faces are in soft focus. The music speeds up as Horatio interrupts Bernardo and points out the ghost. All three men shout and look very intimidated.

The music is picking up pace and becoming much more frantic and louder, we get a quick cut as the sky filled with the ghost in statue form. We can hear horrid stereotypical choral singing, this is meant to make the ghost even more frightening. The camera is looking up to the ghost making it appear bigger than human form. The camera quickly cuts back to the men running through a large magnificent gate. This is a high angled shot and is made to look like the ghost's point of view looking down on the men. The music carries on getting frantic as the men continue to run away from the ghost holding their spears.

This is quite ironic as one, they are running away from the ghost not attacking it and two, their spears could not harm the ghost anyway. The camera chases them as they run across the lit drive-way and up into the courtyard. They end up sheltering behind a large stone structure and we once again get a high angled shot of their quivering bodies. The camera sweeps up and we once again get a short sharp shot of the ghost. Behind the ghost there is a light source to make the ghost appear even more unearthly and threatening. The camera then sweeps down as the music gets faster and more upbeat.

The guards encourage Horatio to speak to the ghost and he begins to shout up to where we believe the ghost is standing. We never get a long shot of the ghost, Branagh uses the men's scared faces and trembling voices to make the ghost appear more frightening. The camera cuts one last time to the ghost which appears to be moving though an intelligent person would see it as just the camera pulling away, there is more choral singing as the

ghost moves away and disappears. We then hear the men frantically talking amongst themselves.

The first thing your notice about Zeffirelli's Hamlet is not so much what you see but more what you hear. We can hear fanfare music with trumpet and horns, this symbolising someone important, maybe royalty. On the screen we can see the word ' Hamlet in large black lettering. Again like in Branagh's version the lettering is in a medieval font which really stands out against the background. I think he has used the colour black because black has connotation with death, misery and tragedy. Behind the text we can see a silhouette of a grand castle.

The camera has a blue filter on making the silhouette appear cold and uninviting. The silhouette gets closer again and we can see the detail of the castle including flags fluttering. The flags are black this giving the impression that someone has died. We see the words ' A play based on William Shakespeare's' this tells us that it is not an exact copy of Shakespeare's text, so he is not going to be so true to Shakespeare's original. The word ' Hamlet' appears again smaller on top of the large lettering, but this time the writing is in white which contrasts with the dark background.

I think Zeffirelli has done this to really emphasise the fact that the play is all about Hamlet, about his life and how he feels. Then the camera swoops through the large letter ' M' of Hamlet into a shot of the castle. I think Zeffirelli does this to tell the audience they are entering Hamlet, into his head, his heart and his deepest thoughts. The camera zooms into the castle and the blue filter lifts. The music is now more meaningful and moving, it



sounds like organs and violins are playing. At first the camera pans down and right and then changes to pan down and left.

The camera takes us down a long line of mourners and the music changes once more to a more sorrowful tune. As we go down the long line of people we know that this is a funeral as everybody is in dark mourning clothes, and that the person that has died is very popular as so many people are outside. There is a big mix of people, which tells us the person touched many walks of life. There are soldiers there, which tells us the person was a fighter. We then get a couple of close ups of peoples face, all different but all with the same kind of expressions sadness, long-faced, miserable and sombre.

Then the camera pulls back and shows us a high angled shot of the courtyard, this again emphasising the person popularity. The camera then fades to a black out. As the camera pans through the crypt the music dies and we can hear female sobbing. The camera pauses on a medium shot of the coffin with people standing either side of it in dark mourning clothes. This shot really does create a sad sombre atmosphere. Next the camera shows a close up of Gertrude. You straight away notice she is in mourning clothes but they are very elaborate with a lot of jewellery and a veil.

I thought the veil made a very sharp contrast as in modern days we associate veils with marriage and weddings. Maybe this is trying to suggest she is not such a grieving wife as Zeffirelli makes her out to be. The veil could also be used to make her look venerable or to make the audience observe Gertrude's costume before they view her face. Gertrude then slowly removes her veil with a trembling hand. We see Gertrude looks tired and

worn out but still vulnerable and threatened. Her face is in obvious soft focus to make her look even more feminine.

She removes a false metal silver flower from her extravagant hair piece. She then kisses it and lays it on her deceased husband's chest. This potentially symbolises many things, love, sorrow and maybe even falseness. I personally interpreted it as a gesture of her love for him; the flower is metal and therefore will last forever just like her love for him. We can see that her reaching for the flower is a spontaneous gesture because of the way she reaches into her hair for it. Violin music starts softly and Gertrude sobs violently over the coffin once more then turns to Polionusis' arms.

This seems to me as a very over-exaggerated and extravagant gesture and you begin to wonder how much of her grief is real and how much is play-acting. The camera then cuts to a stern shot of Claudius' face looking down on her smugly. The audiences mind suddenly starts to establish a link between Claudius (the dead king's brother) and Gertrude (the dead king's wife). Next the camera cuts to a close-up of a hand tightly clenched holding soil. I think this hand represents anger, grief, sorrow and loneliness. This hand also links with Branagh's statue's hand, which is a key similarity between the two.

The arm slowly moves across the coffin sprinkling the soil across the dead king's body. When his hand is empty he rests it on the dead king's chest. This gesture may be much quieter but I believe it is a lot more real and full of feeling than Gertrude's obsessive sobbing. The camera then pans up the persons arm to reveal a hooded figure; this is when the first words of the film

are spoken. Claudius begins his speech to Hamlet; this is when the hooded figure is identified as Hamlet. Claudius goes on about how he will love Hamlet with all the love a real father would have for their son.

This speech is very ironic because Hamlet would not need Claudius to love him as a father if Claudius hadn't killed his real father. Hamlet does acknowledge this speech, but not with words he only nods his head. After Claudius' speech Hamlet goes to join his mother behind the coffin and other people in the crypt place a large slab of stone on top of the coffin finally laying old Hamlet to rest. Claudius then lays a sword ceremoniously on top of old Hamlet's closed coffin; this symbolising he was a fighting king.

Gertrude then stumbles over to the coffin and drapes herself over it dropping her head as she sobs and weeps. Gertrude then slowly lifts her head to face Claudius; we see her face is still in soft focus this making her look very weak, exposed and defenceless. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Claudius looking extremely unimpressed, spiteful and unmoved. During all this Hamlet is looking between the two of them wondering what is going on between them. Some critics say that Hamlet has an Oedipus complex about his mother.

This would explain why he looks so upset, hurt and exposed when he realises there may be something going on between his mother and Claudius. After this Hamlet turns to leave. He's obviously upset, troubled and hurt about his discovery of the relationship between his mother and dead father's brother. As Hamlet leaves the camera pulls back and shows us a medium angled shot of the crypt, the people around and Hamlet. As he walks through the door his

head is bowed and his black hood is up, this shows he is still as distressed as ever even after his father has been laid to rest.

As Hamlet walks through the stone door the scene slowly fades into a black screen. Both directors obviously have different intentions about what their opening tells the viewer. Branagh is set on creating atmosphere and playing with the viewer's minds. There is next to no character building in Branagh's version, but I don't believe he needs to introduce the guards in detail anyway. Zeffirelli on the other hand does not concentrate on either character building or atmosphere, but gives the audience a successful balance of the two.

I personally prefer Zeffirelli's version as, though he makes up his own scene, he introduces the plays background, including the relationships surrounding Hamlet and peoples status in the castle. Though I would not condemn Branagh's version, you could see a lot of time an effort had gone into making everything perfect, the only thing I thought spoilt it was one of the guard's American accent which was very out of place. My favourite part of Zeffirelli's opening was when Gertrude removed the flower from her hair kissed it and laid it on her deceased husband's coffin.

I could see a lot of thought had gone into these few seconds and everything from her facial expressions to her discrete movements were carefully planned out. After finishing this essay I have found myself carefully analysing all films I watch, however annoying for the people I'm watching it with, and I have realised how important the few opening seconds of a film really are.

Whether a director uses them to create atmosphere or to introduce

characters, they make all the difference of capturing the viewer's attention or it being turned off.