

Hamletgood afternoon ladies and gentlemen critics and esteemed

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Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, critics and esteemed guests.

Shakespeare's Hamlet is a timeless classic from the world of English theatre. A tragedy of immortal themes, paranoia, insanity and moral duty, has been brought to the screen many times. Two iterations of 'Hamlet' often come to mind when discussing film adaptations; the 1990 version by director Franco Zeffirelli, and the 1996 version by director Kenneth Branagh. Both directors released starkly different productions of William Shakespeare's famous play, through the manipulation of specific film conventions, while adding in their own unique spin on certain aspects of the tragedy.

My purpose here is to compare both the films and promote which film is to be studied by youth wishing to learn about the notions of heroism through Shakespearean literature.

What can first be identified as a key difference in the two adaptations is the settings. In Branagh's version of Hamlet, the staging of the scenes throughout the glamorous expanse of an Elizabethan palace differs from the impression I had when reading the play Hamlet.

Branagh allows his Hamlet to waltz through brightly-lit interiors filled with luxurious furnishings and courtiers dressed in royal couture surrounded by baroque decor, an air of indulgence that fails to reflect the Prince's spiral into depression and grief. Zeffirelli's version however, finds Hamlet trapped within a medieval castle in a far grungier atmosphere. We as the audience are subjected to the more dusky interiors of the Dark Ages that would facilitate the descent into insanity for Hamlet's tortured existence. Zeffirelli

shows he is more astute in using the visual language of cinema to effect a subliminal message to the audience about the character's state of mind. So in the way that settings are presented, Zeffirelli's version is more suitable for a youth audience today, who can identify with the concept of being surrounded by an atmosphere of crippling negativity despite of having the privilege of being in a society that enjoys an enviably high standard of living.

Another factor that sets Zeffirelli apart from Branagh is his ability to use film technique to underscore the subtext of scene that he directs. Unlike Branagh, Zeffirelli was a seasoned veteran of Shakespearean cinema, having made a successful adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* decades earlier. His experience shows in the cinematography of Hamlet's confrontation with Ophelia, the camera circles around rapidly to convey the swirl of confusion and emotional chaos in the Prince's mind. Later in the Mousetrap scene, the scene is edited with fast cuts to reaction shots that show the escalating of tension as Hamlet anticipates the outcome from a guilt-stricken Claudius. It is the result Hamlet was unable to act on earlier when he came upon Claudius praying after he had resolved to finish the King off once and for all. As Claudius expresses regret of his misdeeds throughout his confession, the camera cuts back and forth between Hamlet and the King to reveal how sensitive Hamlet is to circumstance, the inherent instability of mind that will constantly hinder him from fulfilling his quest to avenge his father's death.

What Branagh offers himself as a director is an unwavering belief that Shakespeare's play was perfect in its rendered form. All that structure of that confessional scene consists of is a single steady shot of the actor playing

Claudius as he drones on incessantly through his unabridged monologue, as if Hamlet expects the King to simply bore himself to death. This is the fate that Zeffirelli spares the youth audience of today, who would identify with how Mel Gibson's Hamlet has moments showing how fear can constrict the heroic tendencies of even the most noble princes.

Next, when comparing the leads of both films, I concluded that Mel Gibson's acting, including his facial expression, gestures and mannerism, were far more extreme and exaggerated than Kenneth Branagh's portrayal of Hamlet. Mel Gibson seemed to really play up the insanity of Hamlet when the script demanded it, much more convincingly than Kenneth Branagh could. In his version, Hamlet was portrayed as quieter and more secretive, likely due to it following the source material to a tee. Branagh overacts in every single scene, exaggerating his manners and speech up to an extent that is almost ridiculous, therefore destroying Hamlet's image of the calm thinker, whose soliloquies are full of dramatic sadness and deeply-felt grief.

Mel Gibson however, portrayed Hamlet with much more range. One moment he could be loud, headstrong and boisterous, ready to duel his duplicitous uncle at the drop of a hat, the next he is stumbling in his own indecision and madness, perfectly epitomised by the famous contemplation of his existing grief, ultimately transforming Gibson's character into a dark, creepy version of itself. Mel Gibson puts all of his talents as a dramatic star into practice and surprises the audience with an outstanding performance, in which the audience can feel Hamlet's suffering and mental exhaustion, but all of that is portrayed through extremely subtle and carefully studied acting

techniques. In the end, I believe the more bombastic and ranged performance of Mel Gibson to not just be far more entertaining for school students, but it also serves to providing a more complex model of heroism, and this again makes the Zeffirelli version a better film.

Both Zeffirelli and Branagh had their own takes on the famous “to be or not be” soliloquy. Zeffirelli has his version of the scene, set below the castle in the family mortuary. Having violently rejected Ophelia, Hamlet climbs down the stone stairs of the medieval castle and into the cellar where all his ancestors’ burial tombs lie, including his father’s. Not only does it foreshadow the pending death of Hamlet, but the family graveyard set design added a much-needed opportunity for Hamlet to exhume his buried emotions into an awakened physical form to manifest in the soliloquy. The scene contrasted life and death within Hamlet, showing how deeply Hamlet’s gloomy thoughts on living and dying were rooted in his mind. Surrounding himself with the tombs and skeletons of his ancestral past, he recites the “to be or not to be” speech in isolation and darkness. Zeffirelli enhanced the scene by setting it in cold and dimly-lit confines, analogous to Hamlet’s own, rapidly blackening soul.

By contrast, Branagh’s version has Hamlet monologuing to himself in the mirror. Rather than have him be confronted by his bloodline’s own mortality in the tomb, Branagh interprets the scene as more of Hamlet contemplating his own duality, whereas Zeffirelli chooses to exemplify Hamlet’s heroism in starkly staring into a hole daring it to stare back at him. While both

interpretations are functionally adequate, I believe Zeffirelli's version to be much more visually and thematically appealing for a young audience.

A final caveat between Zeffirelli and Branagh's versions of Hamlet are how their respective run times affects their educational value. Branagh's version runs for over four hours, which allows the film to cover most of the material discussed in the original play. It presents Shakespeare's authentic vision in all its richness of imagery and thematic splendour, such as in the opening ghost scene, we see Branagh's production accentuating the mystic conflict with digitised sound sampling, impressive visual effects on illuminated stages and exaggerated camera angles. Branagh also offers a full spectrum in portrayals of heroism, from the ability of Hamlet to restrain his more self-destructive impulses, the exercise of duty by Laertes in defending his sister Ophelia's honour, and the royal leadership qualities of Fortinbras in taking charge and bring the world to order again, after relenting from his need for revenge. His content-intensive approach makes certain that no theme is left unexplored.

Contrast this if you will, with Zeffirelli's version, being two and a quarter hours long, similar in length to a summer blockbuster. It forms a more conventional narrative, aligning the dialogue to the action and the dramatic turns to mine the play for its entertainment value. His ghost scene, shot entirely in a low-light environment is less extended, developing the conflict through quick cutting action-reaction edits. It's a style that relies more on what the essence of dramatic cinema rather than extravagance. With its shorter runtime, Zeffirelli's omissions take away from a thorough

interpretation of Shakespeare's play. Although his version is also less demanding of a youth audience, being far more aware of their shorter attention-spans, it's Branagh's adaptation of Hamlet that gives us a more comprehensive insight into the Shakespearean arcs of guilt and redemption. This is why Branagh's version could possibly be preferable for education.

Zeffirelli and Branagh's adaptations of William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" both utilise settings, performances, soliloquy and runtimes to effectively recreate a classic tragedy. However, while Branagh's film is more faithful to the source, ultimately Franco Zeffirelli's is the superior film as its individual qualities are better suited for the fledging minds of twenty-first century students. We can see that Zeffirelli wanted to create a movie more focused on Hamlet's tragic character arc, he doesn't assign as much screen time to supporting cast as Branagh does. He cuts out unimportant scenes, keeps its precise and to the point, and that's how a movie should be. He takes the key dialogue that covers the significant themes, leaving out the excess information, which makes it easier for the youth of today to understand. Branagh on the other hand, copied Shakespeare word for word. It's a perfect movie version to watch if you are too lazy to read the book and want it read out for you. If Shakespeare himself were to watch these two cinematic versions of Hamlet, you might think he would favour the Branagh film given that it has kept the entirety of his text intact, but I'd suggest that in fact he would prefer Zeffirelli's confidence in distilling the essence of Shakespearean drama, proving his intricate of understanding of how the play examines

heroism and his ability to effectively present it to the youth audience of today.