

Shaka in context essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Upon comparing two texts of varying media, it becomes a far more complex task to critically analyse its contents regardless of similar subject matter. Bearing this in mind, the task of analysing the mini-series *Shaka Zulu* (1986) in comparison to that of Elizabeth Paris Watt's novel *Febana* (1963) has to include consideration of the stylistic constraints and benefits of film and the written word. Thus in this critical analysis, the encounters between Shaka and the European contingent in both representations will be juxtaposed, firstly highlighting similarities, and secondly, differences.

The characteristics of the media of each representation will then be contextualized, and the use of various stylistic narrative devices identified. Finally, a brief analysis of the point-of-view each representation has been described by will be compared. The character of Shaka Zulu has long been the source of much literary speculation, with the diary of Fynn providing much insight into his character - the validity of this evidence has come into question however.

While most representations differ in their depiction of Shaka Zulu, at the core of their narrative is the image of Shaka as a powerful and ruthless leader, commanding fearful respect from all of his subjects. The remainder of the literary work surrounding Shaka has created more ambivalence than consensus, abrogating a responsibility to historical accuracy almost altogether, in favour of a more fictionalised and quasi-mythological representation - in part due to the lack of historical fact surrounding his life.

In the excerpt from Watt's *Febana*, the representation of the encounter between Shaka and the European's is portrayed as a meeting between '

Frank and Fynn' and the Zulu tribe, and it is only later that Shaka is identified not only to the two Europeans, but to the reader as well.

Immediately, the Zulu's are 'Othered' from that of Watt's expected typical reader.

Their existence is glorified, exaggerated and distanced from a European norm; ' a hundred thousand Zulus'; ' a vast concourse of black faces'; ' naked bodies'; ' white ox-tail adornments'; ' densely massed around the vast arena of the central cattle kraal'. Within the context of the written work, this type of representation allows for the imagination of the reader to imagine all kinds of ' Others' to themselves. Its length exaggerates the description - a visual portrayal would not have the same effect unless all the aspects listed were given equal attention within a frame.

This, I would suggest, is an example of Wylie's enterrment as well as layback; enterrment referring to a derogatory representation of Shaka (as they are very clearly portrayed as not as civilized and mannered as the Europeans) and layback referring to a tension between the representation and the result of the representation (the way in which the apparent grandeur of the Zulu people actually enhances the position of the Europeans, as it is intertextualized with the enterrment previously identified). This type of inadvertent derogatory portrayal is further used as Watt's narrates "... lions were commonplace; they had never seen horses.

The use of the word ' Hau! ' to express the reaction of the apparently impressed Zulu people further distances the Zulu's from the European norm as it intertextualizes a language unknown to those who would read it. The

subjectivity Watt's lets slip when describing Fynn's "cheerful and devil-m'care" attitude further identifies the Europeans as the 'same' and by association, the Zulu's as the 'other'. The reaction to the Zulu warriors to the display of the horse's athleticism - the horses are a further symbol of the civilization and implied cultural superiority as they suggest a mastery over the natural world - is one "spontaneous... accord of] the highest praises", further indicating a layback technique.

Throughout the narrative of the display of the horses, Watt's incorporates more Zulu language, firstly continuing the othering process, and secondly displaying deadlighting (Wylie, date unknown) in a literal sense, whereby in an attempt to reveal more information on the Zulu language and it's people, she manages to allude to more mystery, and the reader is left without more insight into the culture of the Zulu's.

The excerpt continues as it narrates the meeting with Shaka himself. Frank and Fynn are presented to a number of Zulu chiefs, all of 'wonderful physique and splendid bearing', and they are unable, it is said, to discern Shaka from the group. What is interesting to note at this point is the repeated attention to the appearance and form of 'the Zulu', yet the lack of any description of Frank and Fynn.

While the explanation to this aspect may lie in the fact that they have been described in a previous passage, it still allows for insight into the prejudice of Watt: if they have been described previously, it can only mean that the Zulu's haven't, and thus the book has been written from the European

perspective alone. Upon the identification of Shaka, his physique is further described; he is a 'magnificent creature'.

The ensuing description is immediately countered as 'Frank screwed his monocle...' juxtaposing the 'civil' with the Zulu. Interestingly, in this passage, Watt incorporates a quote from Fynn himself; an intertextualization of Fynn's diary, perhaps. Another example of layback is incorporated, as the assumption, due to Shaka's 'symmetry' and 'smiling and benign' expression, that he could be no 'blood-soaked tyrant' are shattered as he orders the death of a Zulu bystander.

Thus the superiority of Frank and Fynn is immediately re-imposed, despite their incorrect assessment of Shaka. It is thus clear that within the text of the written word, the subjectivity of the author can clearly be imposed on the subject matter and the ability of the narrator to describe the details of the scene within the context he or she chooses is subject to limited variance in interpretation. The representation in the Shaka Zulu mini-series differs significantly to the representation by Watt.

The possibility that Watt's text may have been a resource for the producers of the mini-series to consult must be considered. The excerpt begins with a lengthy scene of the Zulu's - much like the written representation in Watt's novel - in a frantic display of dancing and drum beating, a visual enactment of entertainment within a film text. The use of sound, a media obviously limited in the written word, is repeatedly incorporated throughout the excerpt.

The spectacle of the Zulu's inferred in the scene is magnified in grandeur by the use of the musical score. The scene then shifts to the European

contingent viewing the scene from a telescope, a symbol to suggest, perhaps, their inherent limited ability to interpret the Zulu culture due to the constraints imposed by their 'civilisation'; a notion further emphasised much later as Shaka wears Fynn's glasses and exclaims that the man who wears them does not want to see the world for what it truly is.

The scene then shifts back to the Zulu's and, more specifically, the audience is privy to a conversation - dramatically enacted in English to allow instant understanding by the target audience - between Shaka and another Zulu chief, in which the fearful respect represented in Watt's text is reiterated.

The scene then shifts to the literal encounter, and the display of the horses around the Zulu warriors. What is included in this scene, and omitted in Watt's representation, is the challenge by Shaka, as he instructs his warriors to compete in speed with the horses.

The frenzy of the Zulu's identified in Watt's text as one of amazement is portrayed as one of opposition to the men, as well as support of the Zulu warriors. Thus the acceptance of the Europeans by the Zulu's in Watt's extract, suggested due to their lack of civility and education, is juxtaposed with a sense of rivalry in the film, causing tension between the two representations: one of instant acceptance and one of instant resistance.

The scene then shifts to the presentation of objects from England and 'civilisation' to Shaka: the music box, the mirror, the dog and the glasses (as previously mentioned). There is a tense discourse between Shaka and Farewell, which is skipped altogether in Watt's representation. This would suggest a far more detailed and patient portrayal of their encounter in the

mini-series and the use of the translator allows for dramatic tension as well as a practical aid to the audience and the Europeans alike.

In this scene omitted by Watt, Shaka sacrifices a woman in front of Fynn and Farwell, and demands they revive her by using their medicine. While Watt admittedly does mention a sacrifice, it is depicted as a meaningless killing ordered by a cruel and heartless man who seemingly seeks pleasure from the power it evokes in him. The mini-series representation seeks to portray it as a means for a challenge from Shaka, and hints that it is based in a calculated risk, rather than in heartlessness.

Yet the enterrment suggested by Wylie is blatant at this point. Thus the subconscious portrayal it evokes is similar to that of Watt's extract. The mini-series extract contains a far more balanced portrayal of the two sides of the encounter. While the power and fearful respect Shaka commands is not questioned in either portrayal, the mini-series allows the audience to garner this aspect through a more logical scene development than that of the novel, as we are allowed into the conversations of Shaka as well as that of Fynn and Farewell.

This type of omniscience is what we would have expected in the novel, yet the mini-series manages to produce far more balanced exposure to the two sides, at times even favouring the Zulu perspective. While this does not succeed in siding the viewer with the Zulu's - the othering establishes this impossibility early on - we are still exposed to a culture that we would otherwise have no understanding of. Watt's novel extract is a good example of this, where her attention to the Zulu's serves only to distance us further

from the Zulu's. The historical context of each extract must also be considered.

Watt's novel, written in 1963, is contextualized within the height of the apartheid era, and the inherent fear and misunderstanding of Zulu people at the time is clearly evident in her portrayal. The mini-series also belies its historical context, produced during South Africa's state of emergency. Its success in an international setting further illustrates the hot-topic that was South Africa and its history at the time, and thus any representation made for the international market could not contain any blatant derogatory connotations, as in Watt's portrayal, as it would taint its audience towards an already unpopular country.

It is thus clear that the themes indicated in the representation of the Shaka/European encounter are similar in tone and meaning, yet the mini-series can be allowed far more room in its representation, due to the half-hearted attempt at an unbiased portrayal and the attention to detail it provides, allowing its validity to be increased.

The Watt extract is so tainted by obvious enterrment and bias that its validity as a piece of historical discussion is dubious at best. It is not denied, however, that the film allows for a far more rounded representation due to the nature of the medium, yet a novel does not disallow the possibility for an attempt at objectivity. Yet, it would seem, the mythology surrounding the history of Shaka has yet to be challenged into fact.

Read next:

The Clash within Life is Beautiful

<https://assignbuster.com/shaka-in-context-essay-sample/>