

Advanced Paper 2
Module A - Elective 1: Exploring Connections

Analyse how the central values portrayed in *King Richard III* are creatively reshaped in *Looking for Richard*.

Prescribed texts: King Richard III, William Shakespeare, c. 1593
Looking for Richard, Al Pacino, 1996

Opens with a quotation from the text that leads to a close consideration of *reshaping* and a thesis about the influence of context on *values* (directly connecting with words in question)

Al Pacino states in his docudrama, Looking for Richard, that he wants his film to show that Shakespeare's King Richard III is about "how we think and feel today." This idea of enduring values is reinforced in the interview with the homeless man, who believes that Shakespeare "instructed us" and we still have lessons to learn from him about feeling and understanding. The sub-title of the film is 'A four hundred-year-old work in progress', suggesting that for Pacino there are central values and ideas in the play that remain relevant for contemporary audiences. However, because of the profound changes from Elizabethan England to modern American society and the differences between Shakespearean drama and documentary films, some reshaping and re-interpretation of the original play are necessary.

Form and values are identified as part of context in each text

Some of the central ideas and values in King Richard III examine the nature of authority, the acquisition of power and the extent to which decisions and actions are the result of free will or determinism. Shakespeare expresses these ideas through poetry, with its reliance on motif and extended metaphor, through characterisation and through the idea of metadrama. Pacino also considers these ideas and values, but because he is creating a non-fiction film for a late twentieth-century audience, he works in visual as well as verbal metaphor, heavily edits the play and provides extensive commentary to help his audience to understand "what is this thing that gets between us and Shakespeare."

Background context is linked with the themes of the play and used as an explanation of the characterisation of Richard

Power and authority in Shakespeare's time were conferred through heredity, not merit, and the Wars of the Roses tell us that England was still quite politically unstable only a hundred years before the play was written, with the Yorks and Lancastrians fighting for the right to rule. The stakes were very high, as the monarch had absolute power, usually for life, so there could be fierce competition for the throne within ruling families.

Character is connected to the imagery that is used

Shakespeare examines the nature of power and authority, showing through Richard's actions that the ends do not justify the means, and that there is a moral dimension to the acquisition and exercise of power. Richard is the unabashed villain of the play, a caricature of Vice, willing to do and say anything to get what he wants, proud of his unethical, scheming cleverness and physically crippled and twisted to reflect the deformity and corruption of his soul. Shakespeare provides a clear moral message through Richard. By giving in to his dark side, he may acquire temporary power, but he dies alone and unloved and his reputation is tarnished forever in history. The emblem of the Yorks, the boar, is used to good effect, associating Richard throughout with animals, especially greedy and predatory ones, to suggest that he has lost important human traits in his lust for power. He is also

linked with the dark side through the “shadow” motif, with its suggestions of death, and contrasts significantly with the “sun” and “golden” images of King Edward and Richmond, who are much fitter rulers because they have gained the throne through legitimate means.

Pacino reshapes character and uses language according to the modern context

Pacino takes these ideas and translates them for a modern audience. Throughout the film, Richard is clothed in black and depicted in gloom and half-light, a visual interpretation of the “shadow” motif that tells the audience of the darkness of his character. In modern democratic societies, a close equivalent of a hereditary absolute monarch is the head of an organised crime family, so Pacino comments before the scene where Hastings is set up and despatched that the council meeting is like “all the dons together”, a group of “gangsters, high-class, upper-class thugs.”

Different audience expectations are used to justify Pacino’s interpretation

We no longer expect strong moral messages in our entertainment, even if we do like to see virtue rewarded and the villains punished, so Pacino does not labour the point about Richard’s corruption. Instead, he looks for motivations for his actions, reflecting twentieth-century preoccupations with psychology. The way the play is edited for the film and the commentary and footage that are included depict a Richard who is undoubtedly an evil person, but also one who is clever, witty and takes obvious pleasure in his own mastery of the situation. While this is also true of Shakespeare’s depiction, Pacino takes it a step further by focusing heavily on Richard’s death, which is not shown in the play at all, except through Richmond’s terse statement that “the bloody dog is dead.” Pacino ennobles the death, linking it to tragedy through Richmond’s brutal blow, Richard’s isolation on the screen, his final agonies and the use of requiem music to create a sense of pathos. He elevates the death to performance art by asking in voice-over: “How will Richard die?” The motif of the boar hunt is explored, as a reminder that Shakespeare has dehumanised Richard throughout the play by linking him with animal imagery. While the Elizabethan audience would expect Richard to die quickly and unloved, as just punishment for his attempts to overturn the natural order, contemporary audiences would not necessarily be so satisfied by the perfunctory death of such a compelling villain, requiring a stronger statement to mark his passing.

Text is reshaped through additional material

Comparison of the two audiences

Returns to Elizabethan audience as a link back to a discussion of the play

The Elizabethans had a literal view of spiritual life: heaven and hell were real places and demons, saints, the devil and angels were all real creatures. Stories in The Bible were also taken literally: God created the universe and everything in it. It followed from this that everything that happened was a predestined part of God’s plan. This Elizabethan view of determinism is an important concept in the play. Richard says that he is “determined to prove a villain”, the ambiguity of “determined” raising questions about whether he is acting from independent free will, or whether he is as much a victim of other forces as the force he exerts over his own victims. Shakespeare creates metadrama from this idea of Richard directing events and acting a part to get what he wants. Throughout the play, Richard asserts that he is exercising his own free will, manipulating the other players to defeat the natural order of succession. In his asides and soliloquies, he frequently comments to the audience on his cleverness at arranging circumstances for his own ends. This is seen clearly in the scene of Hastings’ downfall, which

Close reading of scene

uses the language of the stage (“upon your cue”), has a plot device (the strawberries), and assigns roles to the conspirators. Richard is writer, director and principal performer in the scene.

Close reading of play with paraphrased evidence and quotation leads to the conclusion that the play is about determinism

In the following scene, Richard tells the audience about the scripting and acting he has done to get the part he really wants, King of England, and Buckingham boasts of his acting abilities: he can “play the orator” and lists the range of characters and emotions he can “counterfeit”. Richard acts and directs so well that he does indeed gain the throne, so it seems that free will has defeated fate. As he has acquired his power through ruthless action and is so patently undeserving, the natural order must ultimately prevail. Richard is defeated by Richmond, who is shown in the dream scene as the worthier contender because he is God-fearing and honest. The play ends with the sense that the kingdom is now in safe hands because events are not being directed by one man’s self-interest. We also see this idea that human will cannot overturn the natural order when Buckingham acknowledges that he must pay the price for challenging the God-given order of events (“That high All-Seer that I dallied with”). In “Come, lead me, officers, to the block of shame; / Wrong hath but wrong, and blame the due of blame”, he confesses that he has done wrong and must be punished, thus allowing him to die with some dignity and nobility restored. Richard, by contrast, having “determined to prove a villain”, has not achieved anything else: he is unloved, friendless, haunted by nightmares and loses the crown and his life in the end. This suggests that Richard’s rise and fall were pre-determined after all. In plotting, directing and acting as he does, he has simply played the part written for him.

Determinism used as a connection back to the modern context

Twentieth century knowledge of psychology and declining religious beliefs have led to the prevailing view that people are the masters of their own destinies and succeed and fail on the basis of their freely-chosen actions. Therefore, Pacino focuses less on ideas of determinism and more on presenting Richard as the active schemer and manipulator forcing his will on everyone else. Pacino finds the final act exciting, because Richard is more than ever under pressure to maintain his act and must try to continue shaping his own destiny until the final blow descends. The film plays on Shakespeare’s ideas of metadrama and Richard as an actor in a role and takes these ideas considerably further than Shakespeare did. We see Richard standing on the stage and confiding his intentions to the audience, but we also see Pacino directly facing the audience and confiding intentions, both as Richard and as himself as a director, directing himself and other actors. This post-modern self-consciousness permeates the film: it is a film about a play, but also comments about itself in terms of purpose, problems and successes. The lines between reality and fiction are blurred, through seeing actors acting in real life and actors acting on stage, for the camera. The film is a pastiche of styles – stage drama, documentary, academic discussion, vox pop interviews, film noir, gangster film, history play – to indicate the varied audience it is appealing to. The epilogue reminds us that it is all a fiction: the “revels now are ended” and the actors leave the stage. The closing shots of the Cloisters, a play script and a stage take us back to the original play, and the overlay of urban shots mingle the past with the present, the real with the fictional.

A quick closing statement that wraps up the ideas

By looking at Shakespeare's text King Richard III through the twentieth century lens of the film Looking for Richard, we are led to a new understanding of the enduring relevance of Shakespeare's play to the modern audience.

Punctuation hint: Using the colon

Look for the places where the colon is used in this response. Often the colon precedes lists but it can also introduce a quotation. The other use of the colon is between what could otherwise be two sentences, where the second sentence answers or balances the first sentence as if acting as two parts of the same idea.

Writing hint: Using terminology

You'll notice that this text uses many terms such as *metadrama*, and *postmodern* without defining them. The meaning emerges naturally in the surrounding sentences and examples that are given. Avoid adding definitions as this usually alerts a marker that you are not comfortable with the term.