

# English 200: Reading (and Rereading) *Hamlet*

## Film Comparison Essay Assignment

### Length and Due Date

**Length:** 1,250-1,500 words, formatted as described in the “Essays” portion of the syllabus

**Due Date:** Friday, August 13, at 10:00 p.m. via Collect It

### Assignment

Compare and contrast the way two of the following films interpret, critique, and/or re-envision *Hamlet*: *The Bad Sleep Well* (Kurosawa 1960), *Hamlet* (Almeryda 2000), *William Shakespeare’s Hamlet* (Branagh 1996), *Hamlet* (Doran 2009), *Hamlet Goes Business* (Kaurismäki 1987), *Gamlet* (Kozintsev 1964), *Hamlet* (Olivier 1948), and *Hamlet* (Zeffirelli 1990). In your paper, you may focus on how the films use cinematic and narrative techniques to emphasize themes, develop characters and their relationships, or deconstruct Shakespeare’s text. Overall, your goal is to develop an argument about why the films interpret the play as they do.

### Guidelines

- 1) Although I have provided areas of focus, you will need to develop an angle of comparison/contrast. For example, one could examine cinematic techniques in terms of editing, comparing how the films’ cuts draw parallels between particular characters, or in terms of setting, examining how the films use public and private space.
- 2) Effective comparison/contrast essays highlight how similarities and differences reveal something important about each film, the play or the filmmaker(s). As you develop your essay, consider how each film “unlocks” the other. Ask yourself why it is important to examine these films together.
- 3) Rather than offering a catalogue of your observations regarding the films’ similarities and differences, your essay should pose an argument about the significance of the connection. Your thesis should not simply state that “films X and Y treat theme/character/plot element Z similarly and differently.”
- 4) While you can organize your comparison/contrast essay in several ways, you should avoid discussing one film in full, then turning to the other. This format relegates the comparison/contrast to the second half of the paper. Instead, you can structure the first part of the body around similarities, moving from one film to the other, and the second part around differences, discussing each film in turn. You can also focus each paragraph on one similarity or difference, discussing examples from both films.
- 5) Although the comparison/contrast essay examines a large-scale question, close textual analysis will serve as your main source of evidence. In supporting your argument, you will need to pay attention to how the films interpret the play through narrative and/or cinematic techniques. Focus on specific shots or scenes and the cinematic codes at work in those shots or scenes.
- 6) Because you’re submitting your comparison in electronic format, you have the opportunity to incorporate screen shots. However, you must explicate the image within the body of your essay rather than using screen shots as decorations. Identify and discuss the visual details that illustrate your comparison of the films. When using screen shots, caption each image (for example, “Figure 1: Ophelia floating in Olivier’s *Hamlet*”) and reference the figure number in your text (for example, “Olivier’s film offers a visual depiction of Ophelia floating amongst the reeds (see Figure 1)”).

7) Remember that you are writing to an audience who has already viewed the films. Therefore, your essay should not offer plot summaries. Instead, any reference to the films—dialogue quotations, scene descriptions, and explanations of plot movement—should support your analysis.

8) When writing about film, use the present tense (for example, "the camera tracks through the castle in Olivier's *Hamlet*" or "Kaurismäki's Hamlet eats while his father dies").

9) As you develop your argument, don't forget your presentation, those of your classmates, and the discussion of Aki Kaurismäki's *Hamlet Goes Business* on the posting board. A review of notes, presentation materials, and postings may help you to ask key questions and shape your analysis.

10) If you're having difficulty devising an approach to the essay, or if you want to discuss ideas-in-progress, email me or come to my office hours in Padelford A-305.

## Grading

Grades for the comparison/contrast essay will be calculated on an 80-point scale. Essays are due at the time indicated; work submitted after the due date and time will be considered late. Late essays will receive a 10-point deduction per day late, including weekends and holidays. I will make exceptions to the lateness policy only in cases of documented illness or family emergency.