

**Film and Literary Analysis
(Chapter 3)****Characterization**

When we talk about analyzing literature for characterization, we are trying to find out what defines, motivates, or is unique about a particular character. Aspects that we focus on as significant in literature include actions, thoughts, emotions, and speech, as well as other details such as age and physical appearance. We also want to focus on how the writer helps to create or develop this character through various literary techniques.

***Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998)**

0:52:08 - 0:57:23

Prior to this scene, Elizabeth, played by Cate Blanchett, is young and not at all stable in her reign. She has many powerful enemies, chief among them the Catholic priests. In this scene, we see her as she first prepares for and then confronts the English clergymen about a proposal that would reinstate her as the head of the Church of England, which they oppose because of the separation it would cause between themselves and the Pope in Rome. At first, Elizabeth is shown in a **high-key medium shot**, wearing a plain white dressing gown as she practices delivering her speech, changing words and phrases along the way. It is not going well, and she becomes frustrated and scared. The **takes** are quick and the **cuts** seem jarring. The director then does a type of **crosscut flash-forward**, in which we see the gathered clergy, moving aside as she enters, shot in **low-key lighting** from a **low angle** -- that is, from Elizabeth's perspective -- thus emphasizing their strength and her fear. We then **cut** back and forth several times between her practicing and her arrival the next day. When she ascends her throne in front of the clergy, she is now wearing royal red ("her power suit," as one of my students once called it), but she is **framed** almost entirely with **long shots** from above and behind several people's heads. The effect of this **framing** is that we can not make her out too clearly in the crowd; she gets lost amid the men. Initially, the meeting does not go well, but as she gains more control through her verbal wit, the camera begins to **frame** her with more **medium shots**. By the end, when she talks about what is right for "my people," the camera finally shoots her from a **low angle**, **framed** in a **close-up**, straight on without anything blocking her, and the **non-diegetic** music begins and swells as it announces her victory over the clergy. Power has changed; she is in control.

Questions to Consider:

1. What was the purpose of the flash-forward and the crosscutting between Elizabeth preparing for the speech and the gathered clergymen? What did we learn or feel about her because of this technique?
2. How did Elizabeth's contrasting costumes help to establish her character?
3. What was the turning point in this scene? When was she able to gain control in the situation? How was this change conveyed cinematically?

Look at the graphic organizer on the back for a sampling of what some students found as they looked at the characterizations of Elizabeth and Odysseus from "The Odyssey". Notice that, although the characters have little in common, the analytical skills needed for decoding a text and a film are quite similar. -- On the lines provided below the graphic, write a thesis statement about the character of Elizabeth.

Compose a thesis statement about the character of Elizabeth I on the lines below:

***The Remains of the Day* (James Ivory, 1993)**

1:27:17 -- 1:30:20

To put this scene in context: Mr. Stevens, played by Anthony Hopkins, is a butler who has spend much of his life in the service of the lord of the mansion. recently, a housekeeper, Miss Kenton, played by Emma Thompson, has come to work in the house, and they appear to have become infatuated with each other, though neither has acted on it in any way. As this scene begins, Mr. Stevens is nodding off in his very **low key-lit** study while reading a book when miss Kenton enters, brining flowers she has picked for him. When she asks him what he is reading, he dodges her question with other questions and retreats to the far corner of his study, as she continues to tease him slightly about the book, while steadily advancing toward him. When she asks if it is a “racy” book, he responds evasively with, “Do you think such books are to be found on his lordship’s shelves?” When she has him backed up into the corner, the camera uses a series of very tight, claustrophobic **medium shots**, and the **non-diegetic** music has begun, signaling that this might just be the moment when they reveal their feelings to each other. They are so close to each other; the scene, now by the window, has become a little brighter. he holds the book over his heart, while his other hand appears to be almost touching her hair (see Figure 22). As she literally pries the book from him, we hear the exaggerated **diegetic** sound of fingers being pulled off; maybe his heart needs prying?... But, then the music stops, and Miss Kenton declares that the book is not scandalous at all, but just a “sentimental old love story.” Embarrassed either by his nearly exposed emotions or by his reading choices, Mr. Stevens asks her to leave and not to disturb his private time. The scene ends with a beautify, **low-key long shot** of Mr. Stevens still in his corner, unmoving, but looking out where she has left.

Questions to Consider:

1. What does Mr. Stevens reveal about his character through his word choice, movements, and gestures?
2. How does lighting and the non-diegetic sound affect the characterization of Mr. Stevens?
3. How do the framing choices (close-ups, long shots, etc.) reveal emotion in this scene?

On the lines provided below, compose a thesis statement about the character of Mr. Stevens:

Henry V (Kenneth Branagh, 1989)

1:30:00 -- 1:33:07

The war between the English and the French in this film version of Shakespeare's history play has not been going well for the English, who have successfully invaded France but now face a much stronger, larger, and well-rested force in the upcoming climactic battle. The **non-diegetic** sound is of a slow, mournful, drum-like dirge, though this could also be the **diegetic** sound of the French military drummers looming above. Spirits are low, and the men and officers alike are grumbling, bordering on treason, when King Henry overhears them and delivers his "Crispin's Day Speech" in order to rally his troops. As he begins, he is in the **center**, on the men's level, but as he continues he moves to a make-shift platform above the gathered crowd. The **non-diegetic** music changes radically to a very light, then swelling and rousing, melody (notice his position within the frame in the shot in Figure 23). Throughout his speech, we cut from **medium shots** of Henry back to **shots** of the soldiers who are clearly being deeply affected by his words. When Henry says that "...we few, we happy few..." are the ones to share in this glorious victory, we, the audience, see the only **close-up** in the **scene**. The music reaches its crescendo just as Henry shouts "...upon St. Crispin's Day!" and we see long shots of the men shouting and pumping their fists in the air.

Questions to Consider:

1. What does the director do to distinguish Henry from the rest of the soldiers in this scene? (Think **mise-en-scene**.)
2. Think back on the words Henry uses to rouse his men. What makes this speech so persuasive? What are his best arguments?
3. What does the director do to make us feel like we are the soldiers caught up in the action? (Be specific and use your academic vocabulary.)



On the lines provided below, compose a thesis statement about the character of King Henry V.

Culminating Activity

Choose one of the three thesis statements you have written above over one of the three characters and compose a body paragraph and conclusion to go along with your thesis that explains and supports your thesis. Write your brief essay on a separate sheet of notebook paper. Be sure to double space as you write. Avoid using personal pronouns as you write such as *I*, *me*, *we*, *us*, and *you*. Use of these pronouns is unnecessary and is considered unacademic. Be sure to follow directions carefully. Any paper that does not follow directions will be handed back to be rewritten.



Setting

When we analyze the setting of a written text, too often we give merely a description of the weather, the time period, the time of day, or what the place looks like. These are all fine and necessary, but surely we can go a bit further by focusing on how this setting can affect character, theme, and / or plot. The following films illustrate how setting can play an important role in terms of the story and can even act almost as a symbol for the themes of the rest of the film.

***Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950)**

0:11:40 -- 0:14:50

Down-on-his-luck Hollywood screenwriter Joe Gillis, played by William Holden, is running away from some debt collectors when he makes a quick turn into the driveway of what he says in a voice-over is probably an abandoned house. When he pulls his car into the garage, he notices an old car up on blocks with three inches of dust and several tarps covering it. He approaches the house, which he calls “a great big white elephant of a place,” and then he comments that “a neglected house gets an unhappy look; this one had it in spades.” Finally we get to see what he has been describing: In a **long shot**, he is in the center, surrounded by an overgrown garden, an immense unkept house, and dying palm trees. Just as he makes a reference to Miss Havisham’s house and her wedding dress from *Great Expectations*, a female voice calls out “You there!” We follow Gillis’s gaze as the camera **dollies** toward a window covered with broken bamboo shakes, and we can tell that someone is behind the shades, but we cannot see anyone per se. Suddenly a door opens and a man dressed as a servant appears and motions for Gillis to come into the house. he hesitates briefly, and, even though everything he has seen and thought should send him running away, he goes to the door. Fool. Curtly instructed by the servant, played by Erich von Stroheim, to wipe his feet, Joe enters the house as the **non-diegetic** sound takes a noticeably suspenseful turn. Clearly the servant has mistaken Gillis for someone else, though this does not stop Gillis from going up the stairs when told to do so, and the last line of the scene is the servant’s cryptic statement, “If you need help with the coffin, call me.” Gillis again hesitates briefly, but the house has in some way, drawn him in despite all the warning signs. A cut to a **medium shot** of a confused and slightly nervous Gillis ends this sequence. he is inside, and he will never really leave again.



Questions to Consider:

1. How was the house itself used to create suspense in this scene?
2. What contrasting images or ideas did you notice in this scene? What is the effect of those contrasts?
3. How does the mention of Miss Havisham act as foreshadowing? What in the **mise-en-scene** reinforces this foreshadowing?

***Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959) + *The Fall of the House of Usher* by E.A. Poe**

(Examining setting and its effect on characters.)

0:57:34 -- 1:01:37

In this very odd but great Hitchcock film, James Stewart plays Scottie, a detective hired to watch over his friend's wife Madeleine, played by Kim Novak, who appears to be suicidal and possessed by the ghost of a relative of hers who apparently committed suicide herself at just about Madeleine's age. Scottie has fallen in love with her, and she appears to be interested in him, though obviously she's got some other issues going on. In this scene, Madeleine takes Scottie out for a drive in Northern California, and they end up in a forest of great Sequoia trees. The first shot inside the forest is an **extreme long shot**, so much so that, on the first few viewings, you may not even see the two standing there, and the next shot is another **long shot**, but at least we can make them out, though they are dwarfed by one massive tree alongside them. When Scottie asks Madeleine what she is thinking, she says that she can only think about all the people who have died while the trees have lived, and she says, "I don't like it." Throughout this scene there are so many **long shots** that the two characters get lost, especially Scottie, whose dark suit blends into the background. In contrast, Madeleine stands out in her white coat, and the focus is so soft that when she goes behind and among the trees, she seems like a ghost appearing and disappearing and floating around. When she and Scottie look at a cross section of one of the huge trees, its rings labeled with significant dates, Madeleine points to a date near 1880 and says, "Here I was born," and moving her finger slightly, "here I died." She walks away and seems to have disappeared again, but when Scottie catches up to her she says, "Take me away from here... Somewhere in the light." The last shot in the forest is, appropriately, a **long shot** with Scottie barely visible, Madeleine floating beside him, and the trees towering over them.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do the surroundings seem to affect both Madeleine's and Scottie's moods?
2. Why so many long shots? Doesn't something get lost with so few **close-ups**? What is gained?
3. What elements in this scene seem to act as foreshadowing?
4. What do you think the forest represents (symbolizes) in this scene?



Culminating Activity

Look at the beginning of *The Fall of the House of Usher* by E.A. Poe where the house itself causes the narrator's spirit to be pervaded by "A sense of insufferable gloom." Create a chart similar to the one below (Figure 24), on your notebook paper and use it to record your observations about the setting and its effects on characters in both the film *Vertigo* and Poe's short story *The Fall of the House of Usher*.



Point of View

As with the analysis of setting, when we study point of view (P.O.V.) we often do not go beyond merely identifying a particular type of narration. We can easily identify whether the narrator is first-person, third-person limited, or third-person omniscient. Our goal should be to explain how the choice of narration affects what we, the audience, know or feel about a subject. Can the narrator be trusted? Do we know more or less than the characters at a certain point, and why? Do we sympathize with certain characters because of the type of narration? These are the kinds of questions we can help answer by analyzing the point of view in a film.

Before we examine specific films for point of view, we ought to explore, in general, terms, how point of view is expressed through film and where this may overlap with point of view in literature. There is no exact parallel (like those we saw in considering setting and characterization) between point of view in film and point of view in literature, but there is a concept called **focalization** which is very similar to point of view in literature. The term **focalization** offers a way to describe film shots by identifying the point of view behind those shots. There are three such classifications: subjective, authorial, and neutral.

Subjective

This is a type of shot -- or series of shots -- that align us clearly with one character's point of view. It is normally established through the use of an eye-line match and it generally shows us only what the character is seeing or what he or she is able to see. Imagine, for example, that we see a man hunting lions in the middle of a jungle. We hear a sound and we see him looking around, then we cut to what he sees: Something rustling in the bushes. Then maybe we cut back to his face tensing up, and then we cut back to the lion leaping out. The lion is rushing directly toward the hunter, toward the camera, and this toward us. We see what he sees and feel what he feels. This might be closest to a first-person kind of narration where the narrator is an actual character in the story and we see it through his or her eyes. This means, of course, that sometimes we do not get certain information, since the character, too, does not have it.



An example of a subjective (first-person) shot from Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark showing the Hovitos shooting arrows at Indy as he escapes in Jock's plane.

Authorial

In this type of shot, the view cannot be attributed to any character within the film and thus it is a way for the director (the "author" of the film) to give information directly to the audience without also giving it to one of the characters. Back to our lion hunter: We hear the same sound and see the man looking around, but this time we do not cut to his point of view; instead, the camera **dollies** around behind him and shows us a huge, ferocious lion waiting in the bushes. Cut back to the man unaware of the lion's presence. In a long shot now, we see the hunter standing there with his gun as the lion is bearing down on him from behind. We, the audience, have information that the character does not (also known as **Dramatic Irony**). This type of information, though, does not always have to be communicated only through the framing of the shot. Authorial information could come in the form of lighting that comments on a character's inner state of mind, or music that signals that big shark is coming (*Jaws*), or that a killer is on the way to the character's shower. This type of shot and this method of conveying information might best be described as third-person omniscient because the audience gets the details directly without their being filtered through a character. This does not mean, however, that this narrator is to be trusted anymore than a first-person narrator, only that its source is different.



(Murderer)



Neutral

When we were looking at **framing**, **angles**, and **lighting**, we found that the **medium shot**, the **eye-level angle**, and the **even lighting** are all relatively neutral in the sense that, by themselves, they do not automatically carry any significant meaning. In terms of focalization, most shots in a film will be characterized as “neutral” because not every shot can be subjective (i.e., taking a single character’s point of view) or authorial (i.e., readily identifiable as coming straight from the director/writer). So, if our lion-hunter story were going to be filmed neutrally, we might see the hunter, then cut to the lion, and then cut back to the man as he runs away from the lion and the camera. We might not get an eye-line match, nor might we see some dramatic low angle emphasizing the power of the lion. Maybe this point of view is closest to a third-person narrator who observes, but does not comment, intrude, or get inside characters’ thoughts.

These are very rough descriptions (see Figure 25 below for visual representations), and whether a shot is subjective, neutral, or authorial is often subject to interpretation and debate.

Notorious (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941)

1:25:00 -- 1:28:30

Ingrid Bergman plays Alicia, a reluctant American spy who marries Alexander, a suspected Nazi, for the sole purpose of getting information to assist the Allies. Alexander, played by Claude Rains, and his mother have figured out Alicia's deceit and have started to poison her slowly by putting arsenic in her coffee. The scene begins with a **close-up** of the coffee cut as the mother pours, and the camera remains focused in a **close-up** on the cup. This first shot, obviously, is **authorial** because Hitchcock is saying to us, the audience, "*Hey, pay attention to the cut, the cup!*" while Alicia, unaware, accepts the cup. If this bit had been shot neutrally, we probably would have seen the mother, framed in a **medium shot**, merely carrying the cup across the room. As the scene continues the three of them and a guest have a conversation about Alicia's not feeling well, and most of this interaction is shot neutrally, until Hitchcock cuts to a **medium shot** of Alicia, with the coffee cut in the front of the frame in a **close-up**. In this type of **authorial framing**, the cup looks even larger than Alicia; Hitchcock is again saying, "*Did you miss the cup last time? If so, look at it now! It's huge!*" We also catch **authorial** glances from the mother and husband as Alicia drinks from the cup. At one point, however, when the guest accidentally reaches for the tainted cup, both the mother and husband nearly jump out of their seats to stop him. Now we get a series of **subjective shots** from Alicia's point of view (see Figure 26 for a shot where we are moving toward her point of view). She looks at them, then at the cup, then to each of them, zooming in on their guilty faces. As he stands up, she is unsteady and we see her husband and his mother through her drugged eyes: They are out of focus, they turn into shadows, and the sound is distorted. She leaves the room, goes into the hallway, and falls down on the hard floor. The scene ends with a **high-angle (authorial)** shot of her lying on the ground amid a chessboard-like tile pattern, as Hitchcock implicitly asks, "*Could this be checkmate?*" (See the still in Figure 27.)

Questions to Consider:

1. What did Hitchcock gain by having the audience in on the coffee cup before Alicia realized it?
2. Why did he suddenly switch to the series of subjective shots? How would the effect have been different if he had shot the whole scene naturally?
3. Is non-diegetic music always authorial? How could it sometimes be subjective? What about in this case? Is the distorted sound we hear as we see through Alicia's eyes diegetic or non-diegetic?



Jaws (Steven Spielberg, 1975)

0:57:37 -- 1:03:06

Like Hitchcock, Spielberg is a master manipulator, which I think of as a compliment. As we saw in the previous clips dealing with point-of-view, this one from *Jaws* contains various types of **focalization** for the purpose of either giving information to the audience or keeping details hidden from it. Despite several shark attacks, the beaches are back open on the Fourth of July in Amity, which the mayor reminds us means “friendship,” after local fishers have caught what most people assume was the killer shark. The **scene** begins with a series of **neutral shots** that show people in the water and continues with back-and-forth cuts between the water, the shore and the men in boats with riles keeping watch. Everything seems fine, until the camera switches to its water-level shot, which throughout the film has been a signal of an attack. Next, we see several underwater shots of the swimmers from below; these can be either **subjective shots** from the shark’s point-of-view or **authorial shots** used as **foreshadowing** (you will find out which at the end of the clip). Just after the mayor of the town pronounces the beach safe for a TV news reporter, we get two **authorial shots** of a dorsal fin sticking out of the water that slips behind several swimmers and one of the shark watchers, unnoticed. Two close-ups of frightened faces and two screams signal a switch to **subjective point-of-view shots** positioned with the swimmers as they frantically scramble for the shore; the chaos of the evacuation is captured through these handheld, jerky, quick-cutting **subjective shots**. But where is the shark? Is it behind us? Has it attacked anyone? There are no **authorial shots** to let us know: We are the swimmers, unknowing and fearful. After the panic subsides, we learn that the fin was just a hoax by two young boys, so those underwater shots we saw earlier were clearly **authorial**, tension-creating shots, and not **subjective shots** from the point-of-view of the shark, which was not around at the time. A bit later, when a woman starts yelling about a shark, we think nothing of it, thinking that it’s still part of the hoax, until we see another **authorial shot** of a huge fin moving quickly toward a small boat with four boys. The boys and a man have their backs to the coming shark, through we can see it plain as day. When the shark attacks the man, we see it through the eyes of one of the boys, who then becomes frozen with shock. We now see the boy from that water-level point of view, which is clearly established as the shark’s view, as the shark rushes by him. The scene ends when the boy’s father and others take him out of the water.

Questions to Consider:

1. What information did the director give to the audience and what did he conceal? What was the effect of these choices?
2. Why does most of this scene contain only diegetic sound? When does the non-diegetic music begin? Why then?
3. If you had to insert one authorial shot into this scene, where would you put it and why? If you were to add a subjective shot, where would it go? For what effect?



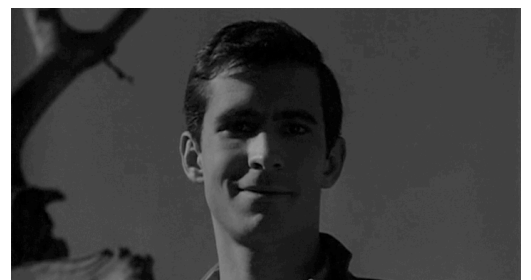
***Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)**

0:58:19 -- 0:59:47

Now that you have been introduced to the concepts of **focalization** through previous clips, Hitchcock's *Psycho* can be used to explore more closely the real power of choosing one type of **focalization** over another. Just prior to this scene, Marion Crane, our only main character of the film so far, was brutally murdered while taking a shower, and Norman, a lonely hotel manager who had dinner with her that night, discovers the body and begins to clean up the mess and dispose of her body because he assumes that his mother killed her. So, in this scene, Norman, played by Anthony Perkins, puts her body in the trunk of her car and takes it down to a conveniently located swamp, into which he pushes her car. Now we see a series of **subjective shots**: Norman looking at the car nervously, hoping it sinks. Cut to the car sinking. Back and forth. There is only the **diegetic sound** of the car sinking -- bubbling sounds as the swamp takes her. Back and forth. Then, suddenly, nothing; the sound stops. Shots again of Norman, then **subjective shots** of the car not sinking, then back quickly to Norman, nervous. It's gotten stuck, we think. He looks around. Back to the car, and stopped and sticking out of the swamp in plain view. Back to Norman, and then we hear the sound of the sinking again. Finally we see another **subjective shot** of the car vanishing into the swamp. Norman visibly relaxes and a small smile escapes.

Questions to Consider:

1. Every time I see this scene I get tense when the car stops and I am relieved when it starts to sink. How does Hitchcock use the **subjective shots** in this scene to get us to root for Norman? I know that I should not feel this way; our main character is dead and in the back of the trunk. If the car sinks, Norman will get away with (at least) the covering up of a murder, and yet still I am relieved, just like he is, at the end. Why?
2. Why do you think Hitchcock felt it necessary to make us feel for Norman at this point in the film?
3. How does the lack of **non-diegetic** sound add to the suspenseful-ness of this scene?
4. If you wanted to add an **authorial shot** to his scene, what would it be, and what purpose would it serve?



***A Christmas Story* (Bob Benjamin Clark, 1983)**

1:08:34 -- 1:10:40

This is a very funny sequence that contains a few wonderfully filmed **subjective shots**. Ralphie is waiting in line to see a department store Santa in order to ask him about getting a Red Ryder BB Gun for Christmas. His mother insists that he'd just shoot his eye out, so Ralphie has no choice but to see the man himself, though he says that he really doesn't believe in Santa anymore. This sequence starts just as his younger brother is put onto Santa's lap, but he gets scared and starts screaming before he can make his request. So now it's Ralphie's turn, and we get a series of **subjective shots** showing his own fear of Santa, whose chair is perched far above the floor. First we get a shot from Ralphie's POV as he is violently whipped around and swung onto Santa, who looks distorted and quite disgusting this close up. In the **subjective shots**, Santa and his helper seem terrifying and rude, while in the **neutral shots** they appear much closer to normal. His fear causes Ralphie to forget what he wanted for Christmas, so when Santa suggests a football and Ralphie nods in agreement, he is slung onto a slide to take him back down. At just the last moment, he remembers his wish, stops his slide, and blurts out his request for the BB gun. After Santa tells him, "*You'll shoot your eye out, kid,*" we switch to a **subjective shot** of Santa and his helper, in a **low angle**, of course, as Santa raises his boot and puts it right in Ralphie's face, sending him down the slide.



Questions to Consider:

1. Besides being from Ralphie's point-of-view, the subjective shots also seemed to be distorted, as if filmed from inside a fish-bowl. Why were they shot that way?
2. Most of the humor seems to come from the **point-of-view shots**; how would this scene have been different if it had filmed neutrally?
3. What **subjective shots** from Santa's point-of-view would have been interesting or funny to see and why?



Symbol (-ism)

When we read, we often point out all the relevant and important symbols in a story or novel. We say things like, “This twig, of course, is a symbol of his inability to love.” We often times do not pick up on a symbol on our first read-through, since, for a symbol to be truly a symbol, it must be repeated throughout a work. A definition for a symbol could be “It is what it is and something more!” In other words, that twig is a twig, but it is also representative of something greater. So we need to see how artists use various techniques to get the audience to recognize that something is, in fact, as symbol. Film works so well for symbols because directors can be so obvious in saying, “Hey, look at this! This is important!” by lighting it or framing it in a particular way. They analysis of symbols works best when studied over the course of the entire work

When studying films or literature, keep a sort of symbol tally sheet like the one shown below in Figure 28 to list recurring references and keep track of their possible meanings.

Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)

0:34:26 -- 0:44:08

Marion Crane, played by Janet Leigh, has stolen money from her employer and, in running away, has ended up at the hotel of amateur taxi-durmast and full time mama's boy Norman Bates, played by Anthony Perkins. He has brought her some food to eat and she suggests that hey eat in his parlor (said the spider to the...). As she looks around, the very first thing she notices is a huge, stuffed owl with wings spread wide as if caught in mid-flight. She notices other stuffed birds on the walls and on the tables around the room. "*You eat like a bird,*" he says to her and he's actually right because Marion, as she pecks at a piece of bread throughout the scene, holds her hand oddly twisted to resemble a bird's claw. I swear I'm not making this up; she really does look like a bird. Her last name of course continues the bird references. Norman says that he likes to stuff birds because they are kind of "*passive to begin with,*" though the birds of prey all around appear to have been anything but passive when they were alive -- and even less so now. Their conversation continues about how everyone can fall into "*private traps,*" and, when Marion mentions his mother, the camera angle and **framing** change dramatically so that we now see Norman in a **low angle** from the side, with the light clearly playing off of only one side of his face, and, more significant for our purposes here, there are now two huge birds with outstretched wings looming over both sides of his head. When she gently suggests that he put his mother into an institution, the framing changes again, but with another, smaller bird next to him, as he says that his mother is as harmless as one of these stuffed birds. (If you've seen the movie feel free to laugh!) After Marion leaves the parlor, Norman can hear her moving around next door, and, as he spies on her through a hole in the wall, the birds again fill the screen around him (see Figure 29). Hitchcock layers so many references to birds through the dialogue, the **mise-en-scene**, and the performances that we must be in the realm of symbols. The trick is can we decipher them?

Questions to Consider:

1. How did Hitchcock's framing choices lead you to see that the birds were somehow important?
2. Think back on what Norman said about the private traps people get into. how does this relate to the bird symbol?
3. How do the birds seem to represent Norman and how do they seem to represent Marion as well? Be specific in your answer.

***The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993)**

0:00:00 -- 0:13:51

With the title alone, you should be easily able to recognize that the director is using the piano as a symbol, but, like other examples, this one uses many different means to make the significance of the symbol clear. The first lines of the film states, *"The voice you hear is not my speaking voice, but my mind's voice."* The woman, Ada, played by Holly Hunter, tells us that she does not know why but that she has not spoken since she was six year old, and she says that her father has arranged for her to be married to a man in New Zealand, whom she has not yet met. Signs of her and her daughter's trip are everywhere. Walking amid the packing crates, she tells us that she is not really silent because she has her piano, which she strokes gently before sitting down and playing a beautifully dramatic and flowing tune. As soon as a woman walks into the room, however, Ada stops suddenly and stares harshly at her. The piano is already established as an extension of her voice and her personality. The next scenes are of a very rough landing of a small ship on a rocky and deserted coast. The piano crate is off-loaded and Ada guides and directs the operation until they have placed it exactly where she wants it. After the sailors leave, we see a series of **long shots**, showing Ada and her daughter along, with their possessions scattered all over the beach, waiting for her fiancé to arrive. She breaks off a piece of the crate holding the piano, just enough space for her to reach one hand inside to play a few notes as her daughter sleeps on her lap. After spending the night on the beach, they are awakened by her husband, played by Sam Neill, and some men he has brought with him to carry her things the long distance to his home. When he says that the piano cannot be taken now, she offers to leave everything else instead. He refuses. Next we see a **long shot** over her shoulder of the piano, which is well below her, left behind on the barren beach by itself. The take is very long and the **non-diegetic** music sounds similar to the song she was playing earlier. From there the director cuts to several seconds of a **close-up** of Ada looking down toward the piano, and the scene concludes with a **long shot** of mother and daughter standing on the hill looking very ill-equipped and out of place in their new home.



Questions to Consider:

1. Describe the several ways in which the director made the piano take on a greater importance than simply a musical instrument?
2. How could the **non-diegetic** music of the final shot be seen as **internal diegetic**? What effect does this have?
3. Besides being a voice for Ada, what else do you think the piano signifies for her?

Irony

Probably the most difficult literary device to learn is irony because it is so difficult even for us English teachers to grasp sometimes! Film has a way of putting conflicting images together in such a way that you can easily recognize that the director may be commenting on the irony of a situation. Someone once said that irony in film (and literature) is all about “*puncturing the expectations of the viewer*” (or reader). In other words, what you expect to see is undercut either by what you hear or by a contrasting visual image, so that the result is the mirror image of your expectations. So, we are not talking about surprise or twist endings in a film, though they often might be ironic, nor are we talking about satire, which is often similar to irony. The best examples of irony in film are the ones hinting that the meaning intended by the director (or writer) is the exact opposite of what he or she appears to be presenting.

***Good Morning, Vietnam* (Barry Levinson, 1987)**

1:28:02 -- 1:33:00

A simple and straightforward example of irony comes just past the mid-point of this comedy / drama about an American radio announcer in Vietnam during the war. It begins with the DJ, played by the late Robin Williams, putting on a record, and we then see a montage of life in Vietnam during the war. As scenes slowly unfold before us -- bombs being dropped, soldiers marching across muddy fields, civilians running away, people being arrested in the streets -- we hear Louis Armstrong’s “*What a Wonderful World*.” It is the clear contrast between the visual image and the sound that leads the viewer to recognize fully the ironic statement of the director. As Armstrong sings, “*I see friends shaking hands*,” for example, we see instead a group of street protestors being beaten by police. He sings, “*I see skies of blue and clouds of white*,” just as a cloud is formed by an explosion behind a group of farmers. This visual is the direct opposite of the expectations one would have for the song, and vice versa. It is the absurdity of war and the difficulties involved in trying to communicate with others that the director illustrates so well through his use of irony.

Questions to Consider:

1. Before we watch the film clip we listened to Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World.” As you listened to the song, what visual pictures did you imagine? What are some of the most striking images that popped into your head? Describe them below.
2. As you watch the film clip without sound what are your feelings about what you see? What would you expect to hear if the sound were turned on?
3. Now that you have seen the clip with sound, how is the scene different with these conflicting ideas that you wrote above? Do you think you can come up with a definition to irony from this activity?



***Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990)**

0:07:20 -- 0:15:30

After the opening titles and a brief introduction, this sequence begins with the local “Avon lady,” Peg, played by Dianne Wiest, going door-to-door in her perfect, cookie-cutter, pastel-colored neighborhood, getting turned down every time. As she gets into her car, she readjusts the side-view mirror and suddenly we see a huge, towering castle behind her. With nothing else, presumably, to lose Peg decides to try her luck there. From this point on, just about everything in this scene contains irony. One would not expect an Avon rep to come knocking on the door of a castle that is clearly meant to resemble the haunted mansions of the Frankenstein movies; for that matter, one would not expect such a place to exist just at the end of the neighborhood’s cul-de-sac. But the irony continues because the castle, and its lone occupant, Edward, played by Johnny Depp, continually contradict everything that we might have expected with the setting and the music. Is this a horror film? Then why are the castle grounds so well manicured? (See Figure 30 for a shot of Peg in the garden.) Why is the creature so sweet and helpless? These contrasting images are repeated throughout the sequence, especially in the last shot, which shows this supposed monster Edward happily riding in Peg’s car through the neighborhood to her home.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the various contradictory images in this scene? What is the effect of these contradictions?
2. How is the audience supposed to feel during this scene, and how do those feelings change?
3. How are the music and costume choices also ironic?

Culminating Activity

Keeping in mind that songs are a form of poetry, read the poem/song and listen to the song *Ironie* by Alanis Morissette (printed below). Annotate the poem as you listen and attempt to identify what in the song is actually ironic. Does our careful analysis of the song/poem *Ironie* help us to better understand the literary concept of irony? Remember, irony is not simply a twist ending or some type of sarcasm!

Ironie

by Alanis Morissette

An old man turned ninety-eight
He won the lottery and died the next day
It's a black fly in your Chardonnay
It's a death row pardon two minutes too late
And isn't it ironic... don't you think

It's like rain on your wedding day
It's a free ride when you've already paid
It's the good advice that you just didn't take
Who would've thought... it figures

Mr. Play It Safe was afraid to fly
He packed his suitcase and kissed his kids goodbye
He waited his whole damn life to take that flight
And as the plane crashed down he thought
"Well isn't this nice..."
And isn't it ironic... don't you think

It's like rain on your wedding day
It's a free ride when you've already paid
It's the good advice that you just didn't take
Who would've thought... it figures

Well life has a funny way of sneaking up on you
When you think everything's okay and everything's going right
And life has a funny way of helping you out when
You think everything's gone wrong and everything blows up
In your face

A traffic jam when you're already late
A no-smoking sign on your cigarette break
It's like ten thousand spoons when all you need is a knife
It's meeting the man of my dreams
And then meeting his beautiful wife
And isn't it ironic...don't you think
A little too ironic...and, yeah, I really do think...

It's like rain on your wedding day
It's a free ride when you've already paid
It's the good advice that you just didn't take
Who would've thought... it figures

Life has a funny way of sneaking up on you
Life has a funny, funny way of helping you out
Helping you out