

Comparing Cinematic Depictions of Lincoln

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students identify and interpret cinematic depictions of Abraham Lincoln as expressed through two highly acclaimed biographical movies: John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012). Ford's film focuses on Lincoln as a young lawyer in Illinois, years before he would run for public office. Spielberg's movie focuses on the last few months of the president's life and his efforts to pass the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude. Students will screen and analyze scenes from both movies and comment on the contrasting depictions.

CONCEPTS

As cultural documents, films are reflections of the society that created them. Therefore, identifying and interpreting cinematic depictions provides insight to the social and political concerns of American society.

A biographical picture (biopic) is based on actuality. But in dramatizing the public and/or private life of an individual, the movie also imagines or fictionalizes some aspects of the individual's life.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- understand that a cinematic depiction is a representation of reality using images and sounds as well as dialogue;
- identify ways in which a filmmaker creates depictions;
- interpret contrasting depictions of Lincoln as expressed in two distinctly different biographical movies.

ACTIVITY A

Young Mr. Lincoln (1939, directed by John Ford)

ENGAGE

Display and discuss PPT slide 2: The Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.

The Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in 1922. Sculptor Daniel Chester French designed the 19-foot statue of the president. (If Lincoln were standing rather than sitting, his height would be 28 feet!) French's depiction is of Lincoln in the midst of the Civil War. Encourage students to comment on Lincoln's posture. Draw their attention to his hands. His right hand is relaxed. His left hand is curled into a fist.

This photograph of the statue was taken in 1980 by photographer Carol Highsmith. She placed her camera at a distance from the statue so as to capture the seated president but also the words carved in stone above his head. The text reads: *In this temple as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.*

Tell students that in this lesson, they will compare and contrast cinematic depictions of Lincoln as presented in two different movies.

EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE

Review, as needed, the definition of depiction. A *depiction* is a representation of reality. To depict is to portray or characterize using words and/or images and sounds. Depictions have connotations or shades of meaning.

Display and discuss PPT slide 3: Cinematic Depictions of Lincoln. Moving images, like sculptures, photographs, paintings, and editorial cartoons, create depictions that may have contrasting connotations. The shots on this slide are from the two movies studied in this lesson: Each movie covers a different period in Lincoln's life—as a young lawyer long before he became president and as the 16th president who led the Union during the American Civil War.

Encourage students to compare and contrast the framing and composition of the stills from each movie. *Although both images show Lincoln in a suit and stovepipe hat, the top shot suggests Lincoln's humble beginnings. He rides a mule and his legs hang below the mule's belly, emphasizing Lincoln's height. The bottom image communicates Lincoln as the commander-in-chief. The troops follow him as he tours a battlefield.*

Display and discuss PPT slide 4: Cinematic Devices for Creating Depictions. Before students can interpret a cinematic depiction, they need some understanding of how these depictions are created. A director may use one or more of the following cinematic devices when creating a depiction:

- *Framing and Composition.* Framing and composition control what the viewer sees. All elements within the frame and their relationship to one another suggest meaning.
- *Camera Angles and Distances.* Where the camera is placed can influence how the viewer perceives a subject. A low camera angle looking up at the subject may suggest power or respect. On the other hand, a high-angle shot looking down on the subject may suggest vulnerability or danger. Camera distance can likewise create meaning. The distance the camera is placed from the subject can reveal the subject in an environment (long shot) or focus more closely on the subject's body language or facial expression (medium and close-up shots).
- *Lighting.* The placement of light sources and the intensity of the light can also influence how the viewer perceives a subject. *Low-key lighting* is when the subject is dimly but carefully lit and can create shadows and/or contrast. This may, in turn, suggest mysteriousness or danger. *High-key lighting* is when the subject is brightly lit, revealing visual details. This may, in turn, suggest openness, cheerfulness, or optimism. Additionally, the *quality of light* used can influence the viewer's perception. Using a harsh, glaring light will have a different effect than a soft or diffused light.
- *Movement.* Movement involves not only the movement of the subject within the frame but also the movement of the camera. Movement can introduce information to the audience and often draws attention to important details within the frame.
- *Action and Reaction Shots.* A subject's movement or behavior can suggest meaning. Analyzing action involves more than observing what happens or what is said. Meaning comes from the way in which a behavior is performed or a line of dialogue is delivered. Body language and facial expression contribute to this. *Reaction shots* suggest a character's thoughts or emotions, such as surprise (or lack of surprise), fear (or lack of fear), etc. Reaction shots can also function as a clue for how the audience may think about or "react" to the subject.
- *Soundtrack.* In addition to dialogue, meaning can be suggested through sound effects, music, and/or silence.

Review, as needed, the definition of a biopic. The biographical motion picture, or *biopic*, is a movie that dramatizes the life story of a real person, either living or dead. Although based in fact, biopics are neither documentaries nor docudramas. Elements of fiction are

strongly evident in these movies, which may cover a subject's entire life or focus on a significant period in an individual's life.

Display PPT slide 5 to introduce *Young Mr. Lincoln*. This biopic is among John Ford's most critically acclaimed films. The story begins in Kentucky with Lincoln making a decision to move to Illinois to practice law. John Ford's portrait of Lincoln is that of a common man with humble beginnings who is destined for greatness.

ASK: Comment on the framing and composition of this still from the movie. How do you interpret its meaning? *Responses will vary. The camera is placed at a distance so as to show Lincoln in his environment, lying on the ground with a log for a pillow and his feet elevated against the tree. This is not the typical image of Lincoln one might see in a textbook or in a portrait gallery. The composition emphasizes Lincoln's ordinariness. His clothing is simple. The book emphasizes his interest in learning. Accept all reasonable responses.*

Tell students that they will screen two scenes from the movie. In the first scene, Lincoln is a new lawyer without very much experience. He has agreed to defend two brothers accused of murder. Although an inexperienced lawyer, he is steadfast in his belief that the brothers are innocent. The scene begins on the night before the trial. Lincoln is in his office playing the mouth harp. In the street below, a carriage passes. Riding in the carriage are two people who will one day become very important in Lincoln's life: his future wife, Mary Todd, and a future political opponent, Stephen Douglas. Encourage students to pay attention to the characters' actions and reactions.

Screen *Young Mr. Lincoln*, "Changing Horses Mid-Stream."

GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. **Refer to PPT slide 6: Sequence of Shots.** Discuss the cinematic devices the director uses in this scene. Comment on the use of lighting, as well as camera placement.

Top left. *Camera placement is outside the window on level with Lincoln. His posture, in part, contributes to the depiction of him as an ordinary man. So does the simple music he makes with the mouth harp. He is at ease, legs propped on the windowsill. While most of the lighting is low-key, a brighter light illuminates Lincoln framed in the window.*

Top right. *This is a long shot. The camera is above the street, still apparently at the level of Lincoln's window. It shows the reaction of the passengers to Lincoln. Douglas has signaled the driver to stop and both Todd and Douglas look upward. The low-key lighting is indicative of nighttime and not necessarily of mystery or danger.*

Bottom left. *The camera placement has changed. It is on the street level and close to the two people in carriage, close enough to enable the viewer to read more closely their reaction to Lincoln. Some students may suggest they are curious or perhaps amused. Again, as in the top left image, light illuminates the faces of both characters.*

Bottom right. *The camera is again on level with Lincoln but much closer now than in the top left shot. The close-up of Lincoln allows the audience to see his reaction to Mary Todd and Steven Douglas looking up at him. Students may interpret his reaction as curiosity or surprise.*

2. **Refer to PPT slide 7: Sequence of Shots, Continued.** Comment on the framing and composition of these three shots.

Top left. *This shot records the judge's reaction as he enters Lincoln's office. Students should note his facial expression, a grimace that suggests either his displeasure or frustration with Lincoln seemingly so at ease on the night before the trial.*

Top right. *Although the judge is above Lincoln in legal stature, Lincoln remains sitting during his visit. Students may suggest his posture with leg elevated suggests he is relaxed, even confident. It is similar to Lincoln's posture in the upper left image on slide 6. The judge leans forward to express his belief that Lincoln should quit the case and ask the more experienced lawyer, Stephen Douglas, to defend the brothers.*

Bottom. *After his refusal to accept the judge's advice, Lincoln begins playing the harp again, indicating the finality of his decision to not "swap horses in the middle of a stream." It also signals that the judge should leave.*

3. Comment on Lincoln's playing the mouth harp. Why do you think the director included this action in this scene? *Answers will vary. The mouth harp is a truly simple instrument, which again suggests Lincoln's unpretentiousness. Perhaps he plays the harp to sort through his thoughts or to relax his mind. When he stops playing, it is either to observe more closely Mary Todd and Stephen Douglas through the window or to listen to the judge's arguments. When he resumes playing, it indicates he is unaffected by the interruptions of the other characters. Accept all reasonable responses.*

Think more about it. What is the meaning of "changing horses mid-stream" and how does this line of dialogue contribute to the overall depiction of Lincoln in this scene? *The phrase is a colloquialism and means to not alter one's decision once made. Lincoln gave his word to the family that he would defend the two sons to the best of his ability. They have put their trust in him, and he is not going to disappoint them. The use of the phrase is*

informal rather than formal language. Much like the mouth harp, it contributes to the overall depiction of Lincoln as a sincere and humble man.

Introduce the second screening. This is the final scene in the movie. Lincoln has won his murder trial case. The brothers are now free to get on with their lives, and they bid Lincoln goodbye. Ford uses this final scene to suggest what lies beyond the horizon for the young lawyer who will one day become president and govern the country through a civil war.

Screen *Young Mr. Lincoln*, “Top of the Hill.”

GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. **Refer to PPT slide 8: Top of the Hill.** Comment on each shot on this slide, identifying cinematic devices that the director used in framing Abraham Lincoln.

Top left. The characters are looking up at Lincoln. He is the center of their attention and therefore the point of emphasis in the frame. The camera is placed at a such a distance as to include all of these characters within the composition of the frame.

Top right: This is a long shot. Lincoln has climbed the hill and is barely distinguishable from the pickets in the fencing. Most students may be able to recognize the top hat but little else about Lincoln. What is important in this frame, also, is the horizon. The dramatic lighting of the sky creates a contrast of light and dark. Some students may describe it as ominous while others might think it is asking the viewer to see beyond the moment into the future.

Lower left: In this long shot, the camera is on the top of the hill so that the viewer can once again see Lincoln front on. This is not a high angle shot because it is not looking down at him, but rather more directly at him. The lighting is dark, ominous. Lincoln appears almost as a silhouette.

Lower right: The camera has not moved but the actor has, walking toward the camera. The lighting is brighter in comparison to the lower left shot. As students may recall, a bolt of lightning from the coming storm has briefly lit up the sky and the tree branches.

2. Comment on the soundtrack. How does it contribute to the overall connotation of this scene? Cite specific details. *As the scene ends, the soundtrack includes thunder. Strains of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” can be heard. This patriotic music enhances the suggestion that Lincoln is truly an extraordinary American, or at least one day will be. Accept all reasonable interpretations.*

Conclude the activity. The final shots in the movie are not of Henry Fonda as Abraham Lincoln. Rather they are of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. This is a direct allusion

to the future Lincoln, the president who will save the union after a civil war. In some earlier scenes, Ford alluded to the memorial in how he framed Lincoln during the trial scenes.

Refer to PPT slide 9, Framing Lincoln. Draw students' attention to the character's posture and the resemblance to the shots of the Lincoln Memorial. In a very subtle way, this framing and composition foreshadows the greatness that this ordinary man will achieve later in life. These shots also contribute to the overall portrait that John Ford has created of Lincoln in his movie. Much like a statue or a monument, a movie, too, can memorialize a subject.

ACTIVITY B

Lincoln (2012, directed by Steven Spielberg)

EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE

Review with students a more detailed description of the biopic. Author and film historian Dennis Bingham provides a more detailed description of the biographical film genre in his book *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* Share the passage below from that book.

The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importances in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person . . . The appeal of the biopic lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in life, known mostly in public, transformed into a character . . .

At the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatize actuality and find in it the filmmaker's own version of truth.

ASK: What do you think the author means by "actuality"?

Actuality means something that is real or true. Relative to biopics, the movie is "supposed to have some basis in actuality," said Bingham.

Emphasize this key point: *Although a biopic has a basis in actual events, the movie may also include scenes that imagine or fictionalize aspects of the individual's life story.*

For example, in *Young Mr. Lincoln* (see Activity A), the scene where Mary Todd and Stephen Douglas hear Lincoln playing the mouth harp is a dramatization. How Lincoln reacted to seeing them together in the street is therefore also imagined and not based on factual details. The overall truth, however, is that these two people were influential in Lincoln's life.

Display PPT slide 10 to introduce Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*. This biopic focuses on the last months of the president's life and his fight to abolish slavery by having the 13th Amendment to the Constitution passed by the House of Representatives. If passed, this amendment would make slavery and involuntary servitude illegal in the United States. The amendment and Lincoln's efforts to ensure passage are based in actuality. However, the director also imagines and dramatizes aspects of this controversial period of Lincoln's life.

Tell students they will screen two scenes from the movie. In the first scene (*top shot*), Lincoln has been reelected to the presidency and plans for his second inauguration are being made. The director shows a very private side of the president as he shares with his wife the details of a dream he has had. The scene takes place in their private chamber, away from other politicians and military advisers. Lincoln's description of the dream has basis in actuality and was documented by Gideon Welles (Lincoln's Secretary of Navy) in his diary, published in 1911. Whether Lincoln also shared his dream with Mary Todd Lincoln, however, is speculation.

In the second scene (*bottom shot*), Lincoln's cabinet is arguing about the lack of necessary votes to ensure passage of the amendment to abolish slavery. In this scene, only two days remain before the vote. Lincoln slams his hand on the table to silence the men. This, too, is a dramatized moment in that it is a private meeting.

Screen *Lincoln*, "Lincoln's Dream."

GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. **Refer to PPT slide 11: Title Card.** The scene begins with this printed text. Why do you think the director chose to include this title card? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that it establishes a setting for the scene that will follow. It also presents details of facts. This is part of the film's presentation of "actuality."*
2. **Refer to PPT slide 12: Depicting Lincoln's Dream.** What cinematic devices does the director use to dramatize Lincoln's dream? *He uses dialogue and framing and composition, as well as movement. The viewer can hear Lincoln describing the dream. Visually, the frame is very dark. Lincoln's image is recognizable but ghostlike. Some students may describe his image as out of focus. Lincoln tells his wife that he has a strong feeling of being alone on this ship, and so no one other than Lincoln can be seen. The ship itself is not depicted, but the movement of the ship is. Students should note how the bright line on the horizon grows larger, suggesting forward momentum.*
3. **Refer to PPT slide 13: Depicting Lincoln and Molly.** Identify cinematic devices the director uses in depicting Lincoln in the scene with his wife, whom he calls Molly. *Interpretations will vary. Some recommended discussion points are below.*

- Framing and composition. *The textbook images of Lincoln generally show him in public wearing a top hat and dark suit with buttoned vest. In this scene, he lounges on a settee that is too small for him, emphasizing his height. He is in shirt sleeves with his vest unbuttoned. He wears no shoes. His body language suggests he is comfortable despite the troubling nature of his dream. Note also that he has been reading and seems deep in thought.*
- Camera angles and distances. *The top left and two lower shots are at a medium distance, allowing the audience to read the character's facial expressions. The top right is a long shot and shows not only Lincoln in the foreground but also his reflection in the dressing table mirror.*
- Dialogue. *Lincoln's use of language is folksy and conversational. He refers to Molly's head as "the coconut," the second inauguration party as a "shindy" and the decorations as "flubdubs." Molly's dialogue also contributes to the depiction of Lincoln. She acknowledges that he has had such dreams prior to military battles, then realizes that the ship on which he is sailing is the 13th Amendment. Lincoln does not respond. She also advises him not to spend the power he has and the love people have for him on an amendment to abolish slavery which is sure to fail. Again, Lincoln doesn't respond. He turns away.*
- Action and reaction shots. *The first shot of Molly in this sequence is her reflection in the mirror (top left). Students may describe her reaction to Lincoln's description of the dream as worried or perplexed, based on her facial expression and how she stares at him in the mirror. In the lower left, she stands before him, looking up and asking him not to pursue the amendment. Lincoln's reaction to Molly's interpretation of the dream is to remain silent. In the lower right shot, he looks at her over the top of his glasses. Some students may say he is frowning. Eventually, he turns away from her without continuing the political discussion. Accept all reasonable responses.*

Think more about it. In an interview with CBS news correspondent Lesley Stahl, Steven Spielberg stated the following: "I've always wanted to tell a story about Lincoln. I saw a paternal father figure, someone who was completely, stubbornly committed to his ideals, his vision." In your opinion, how does the director dramatize Lincoln as a "father figure" in the scene where he carries his son to bed?

Responses will vary. His behavior as he lies on the floor next to his son suggests his tenderness and his love. But the scene also suggests Lincoln's commitment to the abolition of slavery as he looks closely at the photographs his son has been studying.

The slaves for sale are boys, about the same age as his own son. Although Lincoln does not explicitly state his thoughts, students may say that he is thinking about these boys in relation to his own son. Accept all reasonable responses.

Screen *Lincoln*, “The Fate of Human Dignity.”

GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. Describe how this scene depicts Lincoln’s temperament. Comment on his behavior toward the men in his cabinet.

He has lost patience with the excuses his cabinet makes about being unable to secure the votes needed to pass the amendment. Some students may describe his temperament as angry and that would be a valid interpretation. However, his anger is controlled. He slams his hand on the table, raises his voice, but then lowers his voice and spreads his hands in a plea for passage of the amendment. He points emphatically at them, repeating firmly, “Now! Now! Now!”

2. Explain what Lincoln means when he says, “We are stepped out upon the world stage now.”

Answers will vary but should include the main idea that other countries are witnessing America’s civil war and how the nation will resolve the issue of slavery.

Think more about it. According to historians, Lincoln did state at one point that he was the president, “clothed in immense power.” However, they also agree that he very likely did not “bellow [the statement] across the room” during a cabinet meeting as he does in this scene. More likely, he spoke the words quietly to convey his conviction that the amendment must be passed. Answer the questions that follow. In your opinion,

- a) why did the screenwriter include the statement in this scene?
- b) why did actor Daniel Day-Lewis deliver the lines the way he did?
- c) what does the dialogue and its delivery suggest about Lincoln’s character?

Answers will vary. The screenwriter may have taken these words out of context and used them to create drama in the scene. Note how, at the point where Day-Lewis delivers the line, he slowly rises from his chair, adding to the drama of the moment. The scene, and this line in particular, emphasize Lincoln’s commitment not just to end the war but to end slavery before the surrender and peace agreement.

Conclude the activity. Encourage students to comment on the contrast in depictions, based on the scenes they screened from these two movies. First, share the statements

below from both directors about the character Lincoln as presented in their respective movies.

When John Ford first asked Henry Fonda to play Lincoln, the actor said no. "I can't play Lincoln. That's like playing God," he explained. "You're thinking of the Great Emancipator," responded the director. "This is the jack-legged lawyer from Springfield."

In a 2012 interview with journalist Leslie Stahl, Spielberg said: "I think there's a sense of darkness . . . with him (Lincoln). He was living with two agendas, both of which had to do with healing . . . first, to abolish slavery, end the war. But he also had his personal life and I think there's darkness in there."

Those two statements provide some insight into how the directors' depictions of Lincoln differ. The storylines focus on very different periods of Lincoln's life. Ford focuses on Lincoln as a common, inexperienced lawyer. (Ford's use of "jack-legged" in this context means lacking skill or formal training.) Spielberg focuses on a hardened and shrewd president. Additionally, the movies were made seven decades apart—Ford's on the eve of America's entry into the Second World War and Spielberg's in the second decade of the 21st century. While the depictions differ because of these two factors, the way in which the directors use cinematic devices also contributes to the contrast in depictions.

Encourage students to comment on this contrast. Recommended discussion points are below.

- Ford's Lincoln is confident and nonchalant in the scene with the judge. He listens to the judge's advice but does not heed it. He offers a simple explanation: he gave his word to the family to defend the sons and he will not go back on his word. But his behavior also suggests that he has a strategy for defense. The final scene of Ford's movie suggests that greatness awaits Lincoln in the future. The dramatic music in the final shots reinforces this, as does the cut to the Lincoln Memorial. As a result, Ford's Lincoln, especially in this final scene, is more mythical than realistic.
- Spielberg's Lincoln also reveals calm confidence, but the scene with his cabinet also reveals his ideological convictions and political savvy. He expresses power through behavior (slamming his hand, pointing) and fervent dialogue—"Now! Now! Now!" and "See what's in front of you." His emphasis is on human dignity as he reasons with his cabinet that the amendment settles the issue of slavery for all time. This scene is not an exchange of ideas. Rather, Lincoln argues his point of view and demands results, i.e., "Go git 'em."

- While both movies show private moments in Lincoln's life, Ford's depiction is less personal than Spielberg's. Ford shows us a curious Lincoln observing the interaction between Mary Todd and Steven Douglas, but seemingly undisturbed by this interaction. On the other hand, Lincoln shares a troubling dream with his wife, revealing vulnerability. He speaks quietly. He tells her he should not burden her with his troubles. When she gives her interpretation of the dream and argues that he should not pursue the passage of the amendment, he listens but does not engage her in political debate. He walks out of the room.

Teacher's note: A more complete comparison of the differing depictions of Lincoln would require students to screen both movies in their entirety. The scenes presented in this lesson are some examples of how each director used cinematic devices to craft their portraits of the man.