



**Darius Goes West “Know About It”
LESSON PLAN
Subject: ENGLISH
Age range: 6th - 12th grade
Created by: Maria McDonnell, M.A.**

DGW: Know About It, Talk About It, Analyze It

OVERVIEW

This lesson will allow students to examine the literary components of a film, specifically a documentary. Students will explore the elements of both fiction and nonfiction as they pertain to *Darius Goes West*. This lesson will be, in large part, discussion based rather than lecture. Because the arts (literature, film, etc.) lend themselves to interpretation, a broad and deep study should include the insights and ideas of all class members with the instructor serving as the discussion leader. Through this study, students will learn to become more critically attuned to art and literature, film in particular. They will also become actively engaged with broadcast media rather than viewing them as passive forms of entertainment.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- 1) Be able to define terms such as *symbol*, *setting*, *soundtrack*, *narrative structure*, *theme* and discuss how they shape a film.
- 2) Be able to explain how point of view influences reality—in the case of *Darius Goes West*, how do narration and editing shape the film, giving it aspects of both fiction (storytelling) and nonfiction.
- 3) Understand that a film director begins with a purpose, a thesis and an intended audience, and will know how these essential points affect every scene in the finished movie.
- 4) State the purpose, thesis and intended audience behind *Darius Goes West* and critique their effectiveness.

MATERIALS/PREPARATION

A DVD of *Darius Goes West*, television or computer/projector/screen, student notebook or journal, copies of Definitions handout (included in the “Resources” section of this lesson plan). This lesson will be more effective if the students and teacher arrange desks in a large circle for the discussion so that dialogue will seem more natural.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSIONS

1. After watching the film, go over the Definitions handout with your students, reviewing the terms in general, then applying them to *Darius Goes West* specifically. (Ex. What objects or places serve as symbols in the film, and what do they signify? What is the conflict in the film, and how is it resolved?) (If students request a few symbols to open the discussion, ask them to talk

about the significance of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in the film, the hot-air balloon ride, or Darius's old and new wheelchairs.)

2. A documentary is a "true story," but, like all stories, it has been shaped and influenced by its storytellers. Ask students who is telling Darius's story. Are they all telling the same story? How do the different narrators work together to create this particular story? In what ways do their points of view fit together? In what ways do they differ? What would the film gain or lose by including different points of view (Darius's teachers, for example, or his young cousins), or by cutting out some of the people who appear in the movie?

With the many different points of view expressed in *Darius Goes West*, do the students believe that the story has been changed at all from the way it really happened? Is that okay? What are the differences between simply showing an audience video footage of an event and showing them a documentary, like *Darius Goes West*, that includes multiple interviews, editing, a soundtrack, etc. Finally, ask students to consider the ways stories are passed down: orally, verbally, recorded in writing or film. After considering all this, ask them if they believe there is such a thing as pure nonfiction.

3. Tell your students that at the end of Darius's cross-country trip the director had over 300 hours of video footage. The next step was to edit all that footage into a 90-minute documentary. With poor editing, the film could have been confusing, boring, or pointless. In order for an editor to put together a cohesive film that has a clear storyline, s/he needs to establish a purpose and thesis for the film. Every scene in the movie must support that purpose or thesis, and if it doesn't—even if it's a "great" scene—it needs to be cut out.

First, ask your students to determine why the director wanted to make this documentary. Next, ask them to sum up the main theme(s) behind the film in one or two sentences—this is the thesis statement. How do the scenes from the movie support the film's thesis?

4. Ask students who they believe the target audience is for this movie. How do the director and editor make sure this film will appeal to this target audience? With different editing, the same video footage could have been made into a completely different documentary. For example, with a focus on the details of Duchenne muscular dystrophy the film could have been interesting to doctors and scientists, but over the heads of most people. Or the film could have been edited to appeal mainly to people with disabilities, people who travel in RV's, etc. Ask your students to discuss different ways the film could have been edited to appeal to different audiences. Some things to consider are tone, characters, music, language, and scenery.

REVIEW/CLOSURE

At the end of the lesson, sum up the main points of your discussion by writing them on the blackboard. Allow the students to see all they have learned by carefully viewing and reviewing a film. Remind them that all forms of art are meant to be viewed critically, and that all forms of literature will reveal their beauty and subtlety to a careful, analytical reader.

EVALUATION PROCEDURES

While this lesson is based mainly on students' participation in a group discussion, some ideas for written assignments are included with this lesson plan. It is up to each instructor to determine how to assess these written assignments and how formal or informal their format should be. It is suggested, however, that students are encouraged to write freely, as they would in a journal. Students may take more risks with their writing and take bolder steps into analysis if they are allowed to write quickly and without rigid guidelines.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Here are several written assignments or journal entry ideas:

1. Ask students to pretend they are film directors. Have them decide on a purpose for their film, and then develop a thesis statement to govern the film. Finally, ask them to determine a target audience. Have them list these elements along with a working title for the film, then have them flesh out their plot in a brief written synopsis.
2. Ask the students to draw a line down the center of a page in their notebooks. In the left column, have them write adjectives they would have used to describe teens with disabilities before they watched *DGW*. (Tell them to be honest!) In the right column have them write adjectives they would use to describe Darius. Does he fit in with the ideas students held before watching the film? Ask them to write a journal entry about what they have learned from this exercise.
3. Have the students brainstorm to generate lists in their journals of things they remember from the film. This can include, but isn't limited to, words, bits of dialogue, images, colors, sounds, names, and places. Have the students write a poem using words from their lists.
4. In the film, Darius's friends express the way they feel about him. Many times, we assume our loved ones know how we feel about them, but we don't come right out and tell them. Have your students write a letter to someone they care about. Ask them to include personal details and to relate favorite shared memories. The more specific their letters are the more deeply they will touch their readers.

RESOURCES

Definitions

Antagonist: 1. the main character, person, or group, who is in conflict with the film's hero or lead character
2. the bad guy or villain of a film

Archetype: 1. a character, place, or thing, that is repeatedly presented in films
2. a universal symbol that evokes deep responses in a viewer

Audience: spectators, viewers, participants of a film

Back-story: the events that happened prior to the beginning of the story

Cast: a collective term for all of the actors/performers appearing in a film

Character: the fictitious or real individual in a film

Climax: the highest point of tension in a film in which the central character faces the antagonist in a final engagement

Conflict: the opposition of persons or forces that gives rise to the dramatic action in a drama or fiction

Crew: those involved in the technical production of a film

Director: the person responsible for complete artistic control of all phases of a film's production

Documentary: a non-fiction, narrative film with real people (not performers or actors)

Editing: the process of selecting, assembling, arranging, trimming, structuring, and joining together many separate camera takes into a complete film

Fiction: 1. something invented by the imagination
2. an invented story

Genre: refers to a class or type of film (i.e. westerns, sci-fi, documentaries etc.)

Motif: refers to a recurrent element in a film

Narration: 1. the telling of a story
2. the information given to the audience by an off-screen voice or a character in the film

Nonfiction: works of narrative dealing with facts and reality

Point of view: the perspective from which the film story is

Protagonist: 1. the lead or main character in a film
2. a film's hero or heroine

Purpose: the reason for which the film was made

Resolution: 1. the outcome of tension in the scenes after the climax of a film
2. how things turned out for all of the characters

Score: 1. the musical component of a movie's soundtrack
2. the background music in a film

Setting: the time period and place in which the film's story occurs

Soundtrack: a collection of songs heard during the movie

Symbol: an object in a film that stands for an idea, or that has a second level of meaning to it

Theme: the central characteristic, idea, concern or motif in a film

Thesis: 2. the central idea of a film
2. a sentence that states the topic of the film

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria McDonnell, M.A., teaches English courses at Albright College in Reading, PA. She also conducts poetry and creative writing workshops for students of all ages. Since 2000, she has served on the board of directors for the grassroots poetry organization, Berks Bards. Her poems have been published in print and online journals including Steel Point Quarterly, Literary Gazette, Parlor, and Essence, and she has received awards from Writer's Digest and Mulberry Poets and Writers Association. In addition to writing and reading, she enjoys painting, running, and learning to weave. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband and three sons, the youngest of whom has the same type of muscular dystrophy that Darius has.