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**Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Tuesday, May 20. No exceptions can be made.**

**Spring 2014 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application**

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Instructor's name LYNNE STAHL

Department ENGLISH Course # and title ENGL 1158 .112 AMERICAN VOICES: TOMBOYS IN TIME

copies of the assignment sequence, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the assignment sequence in a web accessible archive and make it available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Donna O'Hora (dlo1@cornell.edu) in the Knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning sequence upon submission of the electronic text.

"ACADEMY" OF MOTION PICTURES: EXERCISES IN FILM ANALYSIS  
Title of Assignment Sequence

Instructor's signature [Signature] Date 5/15/14

## **“Academy” of Motion Pictures: Exercises in Film Analysis**

Application for the James Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize

ENGL 1158.112  
American Voices: Tomboys in Time  
Lynne Stahl  
Spring 2014

**Abstract:** This assignment sequence for American Voices: Tomboys in Time, includes preparatory work and three essays. It is designed to develop proficiency in the practice of formal film analysis through a set of tomboy films while posing a series of stylistic challenges. Beginning with a still image and progressing to full sequences and theoretical texts, it asks students to write about film in multiple ways and to construct arguments about the relationship between form and content, foundational texts in gender studies, critical work on tomboys, and various extradiegetic aspects of film.

**Keywords:** film analysis, gender studies, passive voice, word choice

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FWS: ENGL 1158

American Voices: Tomboys in Time

“Academy” of Motion Pictures: Exercises in Film Analysis

I built American Voices: Tomboys in Time around a three-pronged approach to the subject matter; this approach alternately isolated and brought together different aspects of essay-writing. I wanted students to develop analytical faculties for dealing with film and other visual media, which would carry beyond a niche knowledge about the filmic figure of the tomboy that served as the thematic centerpiece for this course, to learn to analyze and craft arguments about the relations between form and content, and to consider film as both a literary and cultural production—one that simultaneously reflects and challenges dominant ideologies of race, class, and sexuality in addition to gender.

I designed this assignment sequence to initiate and advance students in the practices of thinking critically and writing analytically about film; it guides them in a logical progression from still images to isolated scenes to considerations of a particular sequence within the larger context of the film at hand. Further, it requires that they apply their new knowledge of cinematic techniques and how they create meaning, and it gives students practice in gathering visual and aural evidence beyond plot and dialogue.

The assignments described herein demand different kind of writing from students in both topical and stylistic terms; they must work at various points on writing about tomboyism, writing about film as a medium, writing about others’ writing, and writing persuasively. This sequence includes preparatory assignments that serve as analytical foundations from which students might build their full-length essays after feedback from myself and, often, their peers; even if they ultimately choose to write about a different image or scene, they would still know precisely what kind of analysis each essay called for and how to go about executing it. The essay prompts throughout the semester focused on the relationship between form and content; given this emphasis, I wanted to draw students’ attention to that relationship in their own writing. Each assignment, therefore, posed a specific “style challenge,” whether limiting the number of “to be” verbs, demanding smooth transitions between paragraphs, or incorporating stylistic devices into their prose. Each assignment, too, granted students a greater degree of independence (and thus became more challenging) in identifying salient moments and components of a given filmic text.

These assignments constituted the middle portion of the semester, after students had established a working critical knowledge about gender, sexuality, and tomboys within the context of American culture, and after being introduced to various theories of narratology and the distinction between form and content. We had also worked extensively at this point on crafting assertive thesis statements and effective, engaging introductory paragraphs.

Note: I posted these assignments online through a digital film “textbook” I created; students were therefore only a click away from a glossary of film terms for reference. The site and all the preparatory assignments are publicly accessible here: <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-tutorial/>

## 1. Stills and Scrutiny: Making Sense of Mise-en-scène

### Preparatory Assignment 1

Choose one of the still shots from *To Kill a Mockingbird* below. Write one paragraph that is simply descriptive—everything you see in the shot (e.g. "The shot frames three men in a courtroom."). Then, write one more paragraph in which you interpret what you see, crafting at least five assertive and specific claims about the shot (e.g. "The presence of only men reflects male dominance in the legal realm.") These claims need not relate to each other.

Style challenge: Because these sentences you're writing here will be fairly simple, focus on making them crisp and evocative. You may use forms of the verb "to be" (is, are, were, was, been, etc.) no more than four times throughout.



**Essay Prompt 1:**

Choose one of the following quotations. Develop an argument in which you analyze one or two still images to show how *The Member of the Wedding* and/or *To Kill A Mockingbird* bear out or refute the quotation's main idea. Be sure to provide context for the quotation, too—an explanation of what it means in relation the essay's argument. Your essay should be 3-4 pp., double-spaced.

**“Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (Judith Butler 313).**

**“Without mothers to indoctrinate [tomboys] in women’s traditional gender roles, they are able to define these elements for themselves” (Michelle Abate xix).**

**“The ambiguity of the tomboy’s gender mirrors the ambiguity of her purported Caucasian identity” (Abate xxiv).**

Your thesis should incorporate the quotation as well as an assertive, specific claim about it. Example: “Wardrobe, positioning and lighting in *The Member of the Wedding* demonstrate Judith Butler’s notion that ‘Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original’” (313).

The goal of this essay is to practice gathering and applying visual evidence—the foundation of film studies. Since I have basically given you a thesis statement via Abate or Butler, you can focus on crafting a strong argument and supporting it with your analysis of the image(s). This means that successful essays will perform careful analyses of the images and demonstrate a thorough understanding of the text, using specific evidence from it to back up their claims.

**Rationale and Learning Outcomes**

Before crafting an effective argument about a film, students must achieve and demonstrate facility with the medium-specific vocabulary. This preparatory assignment for this essay, therefore, requires that they deploy their new lexicon in analyzing a still image from a film. The identificatory component—simply naming what they see—precedes its analytical element, allowing them to accumulate facts before having to implement those facts as evidence to support claims.

## 2. Scene to Seen: Interpreting and Conveying Meaning Through Film Form

### Preparatory Assignment 2: Scintillating Cinematography

Cinematography is a general term for the art of filming a movie—it has to do with how the movie *moves*, whether within a shot or from one shot to another. We'll go into much greater detail about film techniques next week, but for now I want to get you all thinking about camera movement and editing (that is, how separate shots are put together to create an illusion of seamlessness). Continue to refer to the "Basic Filmic Vocabulary" section for help with specific terms. Some things to think about: is the camera still, or does it move? How is each shot framed? What camera angles are used?

This assignment is similar to the first one, but now you're dealing with a moving sequence rather than a still shot. In your first paragraph, list at least five observations about the way this sequence is filmed. In the next two paragraphs, make interpretations based on those observations. One of these two paragraphs may deal with other formal elements (*mise-en-scène*, etc.), but one should focus solely on cinematography and editing.

Style challenges (note: these are NOT optional!):

- 1) Use no more than five "to be" verbs (is, was, are, etc.).
- 2) Just like a narrative film sequence, your writing should proceed fluidly from one "shot" to another. Work on crafting smooth transitions between your paragraphs. In addition to what we've discussed in class, you can find tips on how to do so here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/574/01/>

Link to video: <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-tutorial/assignment-2>

## Essay Prompt 2: Film Treatment: “Hellfire Hotchkiss”

Your task is to create and pitch a film adaptation of Mark Twain’s “Hellfire Hotchkiss” to a producer. The “thesis statement” for this project—the basic premise of your adaptation—should convey an overarching interpretation of the text based on your own close reading and deep understanding of it.

Provide a brief overall synopsis of the film, and select one scene from the text to focus on and describe in detail. You might begin by discussing casting for each role in the scene—who will play whom, and why? Be sure to demonstrate your comprehension of each character’s function within the story as well as their personal traits. (If you can’t think of an actor who satisfies your wishes, make one up and describe him or her!) The challenge here is to condense a lot of information into only a few pages: be creative but concise. You may alter the narrative so long as you provide justification. Will the tone be comic? Solemn? Ominous?

Your write-up (~4 pp., double-spaced) should include a description of your vision for the scene in detail as well as give a sense of the rest of the film, explaining the reasons behind your particular choices and focusing especially on formal techniques—HOW you’re presenting this narrative. Will the editing be linear? What kind of camera angles will you use and why?

Although this write-up is not a formal analytical essay, it still demands all the elements of good writing: clearly articulated thoughts, logical organization, and engaging prose—you are attempting to persuade a film executive to choose your proposal through the brilliance of your ideas.

You MUST address at least six formal considerations, providing a justification for each one. Possibilities include but are not limited to:

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| -Cinematography | -Editing (includes the sequencing of events, flashbacks, freeze-frames, transitions etc.) |
| -Casting        | -Framing  |
| -Music/sound    | -Setting/time period  |
| -Lighting       | -Genre  |
| -Set/props      | -Market (indie, blockbuster, art cinema, etc.)  |
| -Wardrobe       |   |

Each group will present its pitch to the class on Thursday. This pitch may take whatever form you like but should be approximately 10-15 minutes long. It might include a PowerPoint, clips from other films that demonstrate styles/techniques you’re using, a performed scene (live or filmed).

### Rationale and Learning Outcomes

This preparatory assignment partially repeats the first, asking students to make observations and then to practice using those observations to stake claims—but now with an entire sequence rather than a still image. However, for this exercise, I chose a sequence from a tomboy film we had not watched (and would not watch). As such, the exercise demanded that students make inferences based on their developing understanding of how films signify in formal terms; I wanted to



challenge them not to rely on their knowledge of the full story. This exercise also asked that they draw and reflect upon cultural cues to interpret the scene: did they recognize actors? What genre might this film be, and how do we know? How does the scene position us as spectators? What function might it serve in the larger context of the film?

Next, rather than having them write a conventionally formal essay, I asked students to work in groups to come up with a film proposal for Mark Twain's "Hellfire Hotchkiss," a short story with which we'd begun the semester. This assignment inverted the film analysis they'd done previously, demanding that they make decisions about how to convey certain meanings through film rather than interpreting what and how a particular film "meant." Instead of explaining what effect a given camera achieves, for example, they had to choose a camera angle that would convey some important aspect of their adaptation. I also asked them to justify all their decisions in order to keep them from getting too carried away.

### 3. Plot Twists and Mood Swings: Gender Genre, and Happiness in Film

#### Preparatory Assignment 3:

Choose a scene from either *Juno* or *Some Kind of Wonderful* (no longer than ninety seconds) that you think in some way reveals or contributes to the notion of happiness the film presents. Spend 1-2 pages discussing how the film conveys that notion; how you organize your writing is up to you, but be sure to devote equal consideration to form (how it's filmed, mise-en-scene, music, etc.) and content (dialogue and storyline). For example, if I were writing on *The Member of the Wedding*, I might choose the scene in which Frankie talks about wanting to be a member of her peers' club, or the sequence wherein Alison Bechdel compares her family to the Addams Family if I were writing on *Fun Home*.

Style challenge (note: these are not optional!):

- 1) Use no more than five "to be" verbs
- 2) Quirkiness and originality distinguish the protagonists in both of these films; experiment with your prose! Use at least two figures of speech—metaphor, simile, analogy, hyperbole, etc.—over the course of the assignment.

Link to page: <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-tutorial/assignment-3>

### Essay 3: Gender-bending Endings: Happiness and Conformity in Narrative

Both *Juno* and *Some Kind of Wonderful* feature ostensibly happy endings, yet in class we've noted many moments and aspects in these films that seem to undermine or complicate their happiness, and we've discussed how narrative conventions lead films to do (or not do) certain things in order to satisfy audience expectations (e.g. not seriously considering abortion in *Juno*, the popular girl/outcast opposition in *Wonderful*, etc.).

In this essay, you will draw on those discussions, Sara Ahmed's suspicious writing about happiness, and the preparatory Scalar assignment you've completed; your assignment is to craft an argument about the relationship that either *Juno* or *Wonderful* constructs between and among gender, sexuality, and happiness. You must consider the film's ending alongside one other scene (though you may also make reference to other moments in the film): how do these scenes speak to each other, to gender and sexuality, to character development, to the construction and attainment of happiness? I encourage you to incorporate the writing you've done for your Scalar assignment into this essay.

Be sure to think about the relationship between form and content in these scenes. For example, do the camera angles seem to imply one thing while the dialog says another? Does one scene's tone stick out to you as curious or contradictory in the larger context of the film? How does the presentation of the chronology (fabula) affect your understanding of the film itself? etc.

This essay should be 6-8 pp., double-spaced.

#### Rationale and Learning Outcomes

This assignment draws on all the skills needed for the previous assignments while also necessitating a broader argument about the stakes of the film in relation to a particular critical essay; here, the students' work on cinematic form must intersect with discussions and readings about cultural currents and social norms and how such elements manifest themselves in film, whether through narrative structure, cinematography, storyline, or some combination of all those components (interconnections I hoped would become progressively clearer to students over the course of the semester—they did).

**Reflections**

This sequence of preparatory assignments and essays proved highly successful in bringing together the course's various threads—tomboyism, film analysis, gender and narrative theory, and, of course, the practices of stronger pose, compelling argumentation, and well-supported claims. Students reported enjoying the relative freedom of the preparatory assignments and used them more or less as structured brainstorming exercises to test out their new terminology and develop ideas while honing good stylistic practices at the same time. Their work reflected their quick adoption of this new-to-most mode of analysis; I was consistently struck by the insights they made individually and as a group in conversation about these films. Further, my feedback on these assignments, combined with in-class discussions, let them know whether they were on the right track—or how to get there—before they had to shape them into “real” essays.

If I were to teach this course again, I would tweak the sequence only slightly, perhaps devoting more class time to the process of turning observations into argumentative claims—for example, I might add an activity in which students swapped completed preparatory assignments and practiced crafting an argument based on evidence that someone else has deemed significant. I might also slow down the various components of the second assignment, as some people became comfortable with formal analysis more quickly than others, and I might even move the film adaptation proposal closer to the end of the semester as a fun—but still intellectually rigorous—culminating project in the last weeks of the term and before the final paper. Overall, however, the sequence worked effectively and efficiently to acclimate students to film analysis, developing ideas and eliciting intelligent and incisive discussion and writing.

## Sample Student Work

### 1. Preparatory Assignment 1:

*“To Kill a Mockingbird: Image 1*

In the first still-shot, three men interact with each other in a courtroom. The men act in three distinct roles of the court: the judge, the prosecution, and the defense. Mr. Ewell, the witness for the prosecution, slouches in his seat. The judge looks bored, and can almost be mistaken as sleeping. Atticus Finch stands while the other two men remain seated, making him seem as if he towers over the Mr. Ewell and the judge. The American flag rests against the wall, between all three characters in the shot.

Atticus Finch’s stature positioning him as the tallest man in the room demonstrates his belief in taking the high road and being a man who is above the pettiness and racism of society. Mr. Ewell’s slouching position portrays his confidence that racism and bias will outweigh the justice and fairness. Atticus’ solitary presence on one side of the courtroom, with the judge and Mr. Ewell on the other, reflects that his beliefs in racial equality and justice are outnumbered by the racism of his community. The judge leaning away from the interaction between Atticus and Mr. Ewell demonstrates the American southern legal system’s inability and lack of initiative in dealing with racial issues good—ideals vs. reality. Finally, the American flag resting closest to Atticus demonstrates that ideals of America, the ‘Free World,’ are on his side as he defends racial equality and basic human rights.”

## 2. Essay 1

### Frantic Frankie: Manipulating Mise-en-scène

In Judith Butler's "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," she explores the notion that gender is an undefined term open to one's own interpretation. Unlike the biological definition of the term sex, gender is a cultural or societal interpretation of what it means to be male/female, which refers to biological sex (World Health). Butler believes that unlike sexuality, in which heterosexuality is perceived as the original and homosexuality is the copy, gender is based on an ideal that never actually existed- and that, therefore, there really is no original gender or sexuality. Butler asserts that gender is a "copy of nothing" (313). Frankie Addams, the protagonist in Fred Zinnemann's *The Member of the Wedding*, views gender as a source of frustration throughout the film as she struggles to accept her masculine habits and tries to assimilate to society's view of femininity. In *The Member of the Wedding*, wardrobe, lighting and positioning convey Judith Butler's belief that "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler 313).

In the first still image (see attached - Still Image #1), Frankie's wardrobe is critical in depicting her desire to become more ladylike, which she believes will help her in attaining happiness. She wears a fancy wedding dress and matching headband, which together show her desire to be feminine as she normally dresses in a shirt and shorts. Frankie chooses this dress because she wishes to be a part of her brother and his fiancée's family. She states throughout the film, "They are the we of me," (*The Member of the Wedding*) meaning that she loves both of them and believes that she will only be happy if she lives with them. Frankie believes that if she dresses more like a woman, and conforms to society's idea of the female gender, her brother and his fiancé are more likely to let her live with them. Thus, her wardrobe choice plays a crucial role in her trying to overcome her tomboyism, as she uses her dress to "put on" femininity, to

displace her masculinity. In contrast to Frankie's conformist fashion in the first still shot, the second still image (see attached - Still Image #2), conveys a more accurate portrayal of Frankie's tomboyish style. Frankie's wardrobe in the second shot is much more suited to her personality. She is wearing a more simplistic dress as compared to her previous frilly wedding gown, conveying that she recognizes that she looked unnatural in such fancy apparel. Frankie's choice of clothing conveys her realization that she will not be happy if she conforms to society's gender norm. She must stay true to herself and dress in clothing in which she feels comfortable.

Whereas Frankie's dress in the second film shot reflects Frankie's acceptance of her tomboyish character, the lighting in the first film shot emphasizes the stark contrast between her imagination and reality. In the first image, the sunlight coming in through the window illuminates her dress, highlighting the unnaturalness of Frankie's apparel in comparison to the dark background. The lighting reflecting off her dress represents Frankie's desire to be someone she is not while the background suggests the dark reality that she is a tomboy. Similar to the first image's lighting, the lighting in the second film shot emphasizes Frankie's desire to escape from a world in which she is trapped within the confines of society's idea of gender. The glowing signs in the background convey the sense of awe Frankie feels about the outside world and represent the promise of a better place where she would "fit in." The dark lighting inside of the bar symbolizes Frankie's reality that she cannot escape her inability to conform to society's gender norms. Although Frankie initially saw running away with her brother and his fiancé and becoming part of their loving family as her solution to her gender struggle, she now realizes that she cannot deny her own identity.

In addition to the lighting, the positioning of Frankie and John Henry in the first still image further reflects Frankie's gender conflict. The placement of John Henry with his back

turned away from the audience and his hands covering his eyes indicates his disapproval of Frankie's outfit. John Henry's dislike of Frankie's dress further illustrates the disparity between Frankie's wishes and reality. John Henry likes Frankie as his playmate, someone who is not afraid to get rough and dirty. However, he views the girl in the dress as an imposter, a fake version of Frankie, as she is not wearing her typical boyish apparel. In contrast to the placement of Frankie in the first film image, the positioning of Frankie at the front of the second film shot serves as a way of allowing the audience to empathize with Frankie's desperation of feeling trapped. The audience focuses on both Frankie and the man in the foreground but the background appears blurry. The haziness conveys Frankie's gender confusion and desire to escape. The only outlet to the outside world is through looking out the windows, making the audience, like Frankie, feel stuck in the bar. Butler's notion that "Gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express" (314), is reflected in this film shot as Frankie struggles to accept her tomboyish gender (not male or female). Butler's belief that gender is based on an ideal that doesn't exist is conveyed through Frankie's gender confusion.

The wardrobe, lighting and positioning in these images serve as key pieces of visual evidence in portraying Frankie's struggle with her gender identity, thus supporting Judith Butler's claim that "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (313). Frankie finds it very confusing when society interprets the female gender to have more feminine instead of masculine attributes and thus struggles to adjust to societal views of femininity. As Butler discusses gender in her paper, she also addresses sexuality. She asserts, "Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself" (313). Butler believes that society views heterosexuality as the



dominant sexuality only because people repeat it. She argues that people view homosexuality negatively because it is seen as a copy to the original sexuality. In Frankie's case, the audience does not know her sexuality or gender as she exhibits both feminine and masculine qualities. The movie raises questions about the relationship between gender and sexuality. Does gender imply sexuality? Do Frankie's boyish characteristics signify that she will later in life be homosexual? Or does her struggle to become more feminine mean that she is heterosexual? The weirdness of the ending seems to suggest that society has "failed" her by pressuring her into performing a type of gender that seems alien to her. The wardrobe, lighting and positioning in both screen shots emphasize Frankie's confused state and allows the audience to empathize with Frankie's gender struggle.

Still Image #1 (A Member of the Wedding):



Still Image #2 (A Member of the Wedding):



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