

Silent Running (Dir. Douglas Trumbull, 1972)

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English

Key Stages 3/4

This lesson uses the film *Silent Running* as a stimulus for debate, supporting writing to argue. The principal character, Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern), is alone on a large spacecraft for much of the film, opting to protect a forest he has cultivated on the ship after forests on Earth have become extinct. Students will analyse the ethics of Freeman's actions, after he kills crewmates in order to preserve the last samples of Earth vegetation and animal life (other than humans) ever to exist. Media Literacy links: Mise-en-scène, symbolism, soundtrack, message.

Lesson Objective

- To write to argue the ethics of Freeman Lowell's actions in *Silent Running*.

Curriculum Links

- Writing: Communicate clearly and imaginatively, using and adapting forms and selecting vocabulary appropriate to task and purpose in ways that engage the reader.

You will need...

DVD of *Silent Running* (1972)

Activities

TRAILER: Ethics and the Environment

Fertile Question: How might a filmmaker present an ethical viewpoint?

Half the class come up with group responses to a statement justifying killing in some circumstances. The other come up with responses to a statement arguing that humanity has a responsibility to protect nature at all costs. Share responses. Groups allocated one area to look at whilst watching the film, and are given the fertile question above to consider (check for understanding). Areas to record: Costume; Music and Sound; Plot; Characters and Names.

MAIN ATTRACTION: The Filmmaker's Position

Watch the film. Groups should decide whether their previous opinions on the two statements they were originally given have changed, and share through a spokesperson.

They are then posed the question of whether the filmmaker was presenting a particular ethical stance in the film. (Keywords: Environmentalism; Ethics; Partisan; Bias; Moral).

In groups, decide how the evidence collected on each topic supports or contradicts the two central statements. Once decided, groups should envoy/carousel their findings around the room. Keywords:

- Subtext
- Symbolism
- Mise-en-scène.*

Debate either/both statements, using evidence from the film (if this work is split across more than one lesson, pupils could also collect other evidence from other directors to support their view as homework).

Writing – Storyboard and/or script a 10-minute film using costume, music and sound, plot, characters and naming to present an ethical viewpoint of your choice.

END CREDITS: Storytelling with storyboards

Display storyboards; all students to find one other example of work they think has presented a viewpoint particularly well. Some chosen to talk the class

through that 'filmmaker's' message, and how it has been communicated.

Other ideas:

- Film (and, if possible, edit) your storyboarded or scripted film.
- 'Novelisation' (short novella) of the film, using description to affect the reader and support the ethical message.
- As Freeman Lowell, write to the head of your corporation persuading them to reverse the orders for the destruction of the bio-domes.

*TEACHER NOTES:

- On characters/names, elicit symbolism of Freeman Lowell's name, the crewmen's names (Wolf, Barker etc.) and the act of naming the drones Huey, Dewie and Louie (Disney duck characters, and brothers). Also the *Valley Forge* – contrast between nature and industry.
- On costume, elicit what might be suggested by colours worn, and by Freeman's wearing a monk-like robe out of preference.
- Music – see separate information on Joan Baez.
- Plot – elicit that most of the dialogue is in the first part of the film, and why the director has chosen to do this. Is Freeman isolated? How does the pacing of the film make the audience feel? What could the filmmaker be implying? etc.

Extras

Other Ideas

Information sheet on Joan Baez (composer); Information on Tolkein and the Industrial Revolution – useful for looking at the ‘Valley Forge’ symbolism and comparing the jettisoning of the bio-domes with the destruction of Isengard in *The Two Towers*.

Read

The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment by Professor Louise Westling

Cinematic Storytelling by Jennifer Van Sijll

Film and Everyday Eco-disasters by Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann

Silent Running: BFI Film Classics by Mark Kermode

Watch

Destruction of Isengard sequence from *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Dir. Peter Jackson, 2002)

An Inconvenient Truth (Dir. Davis Guggenheim, 2006)

Sunshine (Dir. Danny Boyle, 2007)

2001: A Space Odyssey (Dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968)

Koyaanisqatsi (Dir. Godfrey Reggio, 1982)

BONUS FEATURES: ECO-MINDED ART

Joan Baez and *Silent Running*

The film's composer, Joan Baez, is a folk singer and songwriter who did not usually write music for films. She is well known for engaging in public causes and for protesting against politics she believes to be wrong, often using music. She was a highly prominent figure in the **counterculture** movement of the 1960s. During her career, which began in 1958, Baez has campaigned around issues including:

- The Civil Rights movement
- The Vietnam War
- Human rights
- Environmental causes
- Opposition to the death penalty
- Gay and lesbian rights
- Support for the election of President Obama in 2008.

Things to consider might be:

1. Why did Baez become involved with a film like *Silent Running*?
2. Why might the filmmaker have wanted to use folk-style music, rather than the usual, instrumental film soundtrack?
3. What do Baez's lyrics suggest to you?
4. How have her songs been used to frame events in the film? When is silence used?

Tolkien and the Industrial Revolution

The disregard for nature shown by some characters in *Silent Running*, and the attitude that industry and profit are more important, has been explored by many writers and filmmakers, including J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Industrial Revolution can broadly be explained as the shift in Britain from agriculture (farming) to heavy industry, in factories and mines, as the main support of the country's economy. This occurred from the mid-18th to the late-19th centuries, and whereas before this, the majority of people lived and worked in the countryside, industrialisation caused mass migration to cities, where factory jobs in shipbuilding, metals, and other heavy goods were usually based. J.R.R. Tolkien grew up in Birmingham in the early twentieth century. Birmingham was one of the cradles of British industry, and Tolkien would have been familiar

with the smoky air and pollution caused by its factories. He preferred to explore the beautiful countryside surrounding the city, which he may have used as inspiration for the Shire in his books *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

It might be useful to watch the sequence from *The Two Towers* in which the forest of Isengard is destroyed by Saruman to become a base for his army, as a comparison to *Silent Running*.

Interesting questions might be:

1. How is the human cost of disregard for the environment explored in each film?
2. Think about the ship's name, the Valley Forge. What do these words mean? What contrast could be drawn here?
3. What is nature's response to threat in each film?
4. How does each present the idea of responsibility?
5. Compare the use of music in the two films.