

THE WALK

Questions and notes for using this resource in A-level Media Studies or Film Studies

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Media language: knowledge, analysis and interpretation

The writer and director of *The Walk* made conscious choices in the material they selected and the way they presented that material.

1. The film uses the repeated metaphor of a walk. Walking is emphasised both in the script and in the way the actor moves restlessly about the space.
What does this metaphor represent? How does it make you feel?
2. The film was adapted from a stage play written for one actor. It was decided to retain the format of having one actor to play the parts of William Wilberforce, John Newton, and the narrator. It would have been more conventional, easier to film, and not much more expensive to use three actors.
Why do you think the choice was made to use a single actor?
3. *The Walk* is told in a mixture of recall and present tense narration. The recall is in the past tense, memory – for example, Wilberforce reading from his diary about the meeting with Newton on 7 December 1785, and Newton recalling the storm at sea. The present tense includes Wilberforce's speeches to Parliament in 1789 and 1807.
What does the mixture of these two genres achieve?
Who is the actor telling the story to – to us or to himself?

The Bible can be seen as a series of reminiscences, of people recalling their own experience of and revelation from God.
Why would people need to retell their own experiences to themselves?
4. The set designer and director have made many distinctive visual choices.
What did the use of a decaying Scottish castle for a set represent to you?
Candlelight and firelight are used to light most of the film; daylight is only used at the end of the film. What did this make you feel?
Would you have been able to guess the date of the events in the film from the costumes and furniture? Do you think it matters whether a historical piece is set in entirely accurate historical costume?

Content: selection, narrative and meaning

The Walk does not tell the entire story of Wilberforce's life nor the whole story about the abolition movement, but rather selects material from those narratives and invites us to draw meaning from that selection.

1. Why does *The Walk* focus on the moment that William Wilberforce chose to be both a Christian and involved in the political world, rather than on either the moment of his conversion to Christianity or the moment of the actual abolition of slavery?
2. After becoming a Christian, John Newton did not at first speak out against the slave trade, yet later urged Wilberforce to do so. Are there any clues in the piece as to why this was?
3. In the accompanying DVD of *The Making of the Walk*, the director of photography describes the piece as 'metaphorical, not didactic'. What do you think he means by this?
4. In his speech of 1789 Wilberforce refers to 'the principles of Natural Justice'. What do you understand these to be?
The Golden Rule (do as you would be done by) is held as a universal truth by many religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Why would such a rule be completely opposed to slavery?

Representation: Invisibility and propaganda

During most of human history the point of view of a powerful elite has had privileged access to what we now call the media. The decision to redress this balance is a deliberate one, and may run the risk of a writer being labelled a 'propagandist' or 'politically correct'.

1. Women in the C18th and C19th did not have the vote and had very few ways of influencing political life. Hannah More campaigned against slavery through her poetry and other writings; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_More and <http://www.brycchancarey.com/slavery/morepoems.htm>
What other women are inferred or mentioned in the film? Do you know of any slave women or freed slave women who were able to express themselves in writing? Some women you might research are Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs and Mary Prince.
2. English Literature of the C18th and early C19th occasionally mentions slavery. For example, in Jane Austen's novels *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, two of the central – and not necessarily unlikeable – characters (Sir Thomas Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, and Mrs Smith in *Persuasion*) derive some of their income from slave-worked plantations in the West Indies. This was seen as perfectly normal – just like people might have shares in British Gas today. If you were planning to adapt either of these novels for TV or film, how would you address the issue of slavery? Or, given that the issue is not essential to the plot, would you ignore it altogether?
3. In the accompanying DVD of *The Making of the Walk*, the director, Norman Stone, says that he wants to "make people feel so much they can't help but think... the

difference is, if you turn it into propaganda, if you try to sell something, if you try to push a point of view wrongly, you end up snapping the relationship with the audience – in fact I hope you do.”

What did this film make you feel, and what did that make you think? Did you feel a relationship with the protagonist in this film? What was it? How did it influence your thoughts about the struggle to abolish slavery?

Other films that deal with slavery include *Amistad* (1997), *Beloved* (1998), *Glory* (1989) and *Amazing Grace* (2007). Which of these films have you seen? Did they engage your feelings alone or did they make you both feel and think?

Do you consider any of them acted as propaganda?

Discuss ways that the films differ in their approach to making their audience reflect on slavery.

Politics and activism

Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History* argues that we are witnessing the universalising of Western liberal democracy and a decrease of systematic violence such as war (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_End_of_History_and_the_Last_Man). However, conflict between classes, nations, races and other groups continues today.

1. In the Marxist model of economic determinism the values of 'secondary' ideological and political institutions, such as churches, the media, and schools, are determined by the prevailing economic order. For example, in our society it is seen as normal that some people are employers and other people are employed, and the media does not tend to contest this. A more concrete example would be employers' organisations such as the CBI complaining that many school-leavers have poor maths ability, and the government then investing in a 'numeracy hour' in primary schools.

Slavery and its associated trade in rum, sugar, cotton and tobacco supplied 80% of overseas earnings to the British economy in the C18th. Wilberforce and his friends (who represented a 'secondary ideological institution') were able to defeat a powerful economic system.

What significance does this have for current struggles against injustice?

What do you feel are issues today that are equivalent to the fight against slavery?

2. The struggle for the abolition of slavery used many tactics. These included publishing the autobiographies of former slaves such as Olaudah Equiano, collecting testimonies from sailors on slave ships, writing poems, undertaking legal cases on behalf of escaped slaves in the UK (e.g. the Somerset case, 1772), organising public speakers, and even jewellery. Josiah Wedgwood manufactured fashionable cameo brooches depicting a slave and the words "Am I not a man and a brother?"

You can find out more at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism>

George Monbiot, an environmentalist and writer, argues that people have more power as activists than as consumers. Do you think a consumer boycott of sugar, tobacco, etc. grown using slave labour would have been effective on its own?

Make two lists of ways that you could act on an issue important to you, one as a consumer and the other as an activist. Discuss which would be the most effective.

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In recent years the media has presented consumer choice as a more effective weapon than activism. Why do you think they have done this?

There are several contemporary campaigns that use a range of interesting media strategies, for example, Fathers For Justice, and the anti-road price lobby. How do these groups differ from the anti-slavery campaigners?