LESSON TITLE: War and Leadership in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*

GRADE LEVEL: Grades 9-12

TIME ALLOTMENT: Two 45-minute class periods

OVERVIEW: This lesson uses video segments from the PBS series *Shakespeare Uncovered* to explore the nature of war and its impact on those who fight it - particularly the title character of William Shakespeare’s “history” play *Henry V*.

In the Introductory Activity, students brainstorm different reasons that nations have gone to war throughout history, and weigh which reasons they consider just or unjust. In the Learning Activity, students watch video segments from *Shakespeare Uncovered* exploring the nature and morality of war, the military necessity of the ethically questionable concept of honor, and the tendency of humanity to forget the bloody cost of war while remembering its glory. The Culminating Activity asks students to find parallels to Shakespeare’s history plays in our own historical movies today, and suggests that difficulty of creating truly anti-war works of art.

This lesson is best used before, during, or after a unit on Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, or in a unit on history in literature.

SUBJECT MATTER: English/Language Arts; History

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify the root causes of war and discuss the relative justness of each;
- Compare and contrast how the experience of war is different for military leaders and the soldiers they command;
- Discuss the different and often contradictory elements of what Shakespeare suggests is effective military leadership;
- Describe how Shakespeare’s sense of ambiguity complicates and deepens the narrative of *Henry V*;
- Find parallels between how Shakespeare’s plays have shaped people’s understanding of history and how contemporary historical films shape our own.

STANDARDS

Common Core Standards
[http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy)

Grades 9-10
RL.9-10.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
RL.9-10.6. Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

RI.9-10.6. Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

RI.9-10.7. Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

W.9-10.6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

**Grades 11-12**

RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

RL.11-12.5 Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

RL.11-12.6 Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

RL.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

**MEDIA COMPONENTS**

*Shakespeare Uncovered: Henry IV & V with Jeremy Irons*
Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.
Segment 1: “May I with Right and Conscience Make this Claim?”
The darkly comic and ironic aspects of the justification for Henry’s campaign in France are explored, focusing especially on Olivier’s 1944 film version of the play.

Segment 2: “Once More Unto The Breach”
Director Thea Sharrock explains that her new production of *Henry V* is neither pro nor anti-war, but is rather an acknowledgement that “war happens,” and an attempt to understand the individuals shaped by it.

Segment 3: “The Battle of Agincourt”
On the eve of what history will remember as the Battle of Agincourt, Henry V moves among his soldiers, listening to their fears and anger made all the more poignant by their powerlessness. Henry’s great moment as king comes as he inspires his soldiers by making his cause England’s own.

Segment 4: “Have We Learned Anything?”
This segment reflects on the transience of Henry V’s military accomplishments, the bloody price of his battlefield glory, and humanity’s ongoing inability to learn the larger lessons of war’s futility.

PREP FOR TEACHERS
Prior to teaching this lesson, you will need to preview all of the video segments used in the lesson. Prepare to watch them using your classroom’s Internet connection.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY
1. Write the following question on the board and give students five minutes to write a brief journal entry in response: “What are some of the reasons throughout history that nations have gone to war?” Students should be as specific as possible.
2. Ask for volunteers to offer their answers and write them on the board. *(Answers will vary but should include territorial expansion, resource acquisition, political or diplomatic offense, defeat of a dangerous enemy, and the quest for old-fashioned glory.)* Ask students which of the reasons listed they would describe as “just” or “unjust.” *(Accept all answers and note them on the board.)*
3. Explain that the remainder of this lesson will be an exploration of that nature of war - just or otherwise - and its impact on those who fight them, as depicted in an episode of the PBS series *Shakespeare Uncovered* focusing on William Shakespeare’s “history” play *Henry V*.

LEARNING ACTIVITY
1. Tell the class the first video segment they will be watching describes Shakespeare’s interpretation in *Henry V* of why England’s 15th century King Henry V began a military campaign against France. Provide a focus question by asking students what Henry’s claim to the French throne was. Play the video segment “May I with Right and Conscience Make this Claim?” *(Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)*
2. Review the focus question: What was Henry’s claim to the French throne? (England already ruled much of France.) Does Shakespeare feel Henry’s justification for war was, in fact, just? (It is unclear, and open to interpretation.) Why does host Jeremy Irons suggest that Shakespeare was skeptical of Henry’s claim to the French throne? (The comic potential of the scene.)

3. Ask students why they think Shakespeare would have left any room for doubt in establishing such a fundamental point of the narrative for Henry V? (Accept all answers, and then suggest that perhaps the relative justness of this or any particular war was not really Shakespeare’s point.) Provide a focus question for the next segment by asking students to watch for what director Thea Sharrock and actor Tom Hiddleston think Henry V is really about. Play the video segment “Once More Unto The Breach”. (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)

4. Review the focus question: What do director Thea Sharrock and actor Tom Hiddleston think Henry V is really about? (They both think the play is Shakespeare’s meditation on the nature of war and its effect on those who experience it.) How do they think the experience of war affects Henry in particular? (The formerly wayward Hal becomes a disciplined soldier - “the name that in my thoughts becomes me best” - capable of both nobly inspiring his men and brutally terrifying his enemies.) Do Sharrock and Hiddleston feel they are making a pro- or anti-war film? (Neither. They believe the play itself is more complex than that - that Shakespeare wrote a deliberately ambiguous play to better explore the complexities of how wars are fought and won.)

5. Tell students that the British film production of Henry V starring Laurence Olivier - of which they have already seen part - was made in 1944, at the height of World War II, and is considered a classic example of wartime propaganda, lionizing England’s most famous warrior king at a time when the nation was once again fighting for its existence. Ask students why they think Sharrock and Hiddleston’s recent adaptation might approach the material differently. (Accept all answers, but encourage an understanding that war itself is viewed more complexly today than it was in 1944.) Explain that this more ambiguously nuanced view of war is a relatively recent convention, and that even in the last century, war was commonly understood to be a largely glorious and heroic adventure. Provide a focus for the next segment by asking students how Shakespeare himself subverted this traditional view of war in his famous scene set on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt. Play the video segment “The Battle of Agincourt”. (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)

6. Pause the segment at 01:56, after Professor Stephen Greenblatt says “…decisions that for all he knows are going to lead all of them to their deaths.” Review the focus question: How did Shakespeare himself subvert the traditional view of war in his famous scene set on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt? (He focuses on the natural fear and helpless anger of the anonymous common soldiers who will be doing most of the dying.) Ask students why they think Shakespeare made Henry himself a participant in this scene in the disguise of a common soldier. Why is his presence at the campfire important? (Accept all answers, but encourage an understanding that Henry V is perhaps, above all, a play about leadership, and
about how all aspects of war - including the sentiments of his soldiers - shape a king, especially one like Henry who seeks to define himself as a soldier.) Ask students how they think what Henry heard around the campfire will affect him in the coming battle. (Accept all answers.) Provide a focus for the remainder of the video segment by asking how Henry inspires his men for the Battle of Agincourt. Resume playing the segment through to the end.

7. Review the focus question: How does Henry inspire his men for the Battle of Agincourt? (He gives a speech extolling the basic, old-fashioned virtues of courage and camaraderie among his outnumbered “band of brothers.”) How does Hiddleston’s interpretation of the “band of brothers” speech differ from those of Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Brannagh? (While Olivier and Brannagh delivered the speech as expansive morale-boosting performances before their entire armies, Hiddleston speaks Henry’s lines much more intimately and contemplatively, to only a handful of soldiers around him; he is effectively speaking as much to himself as to anyone else.) Ask students why they think Hiddleston and Sharrock made the decision to present this famous speech in such a non-traditional manner. (Sharrock and Hiddleston are interested in highlighting the moral complexities and ambiguities of war and how they play out in the psyche of soldiers in general and Henry in particular; the pensive delivery of Hiddleston’s Henry reflects the anxiety and anguish of the soldiers he heard the previous night around the campfire, and his knowledge that many of them are about to die.)

8. Ask students which of the three versions of Henry’s speech they’ve seen portions of - Olivier’s, Brannagh’s and Hiddleston’s - they find the most sympathetic and moving, rewatching the previous segment if necessary. (Accept all answers.) Now have students imagine they themselves are soldiers in Henry’s army at Agincourt, about to face a much larger enemy army. Which of the three kings would they want leading them? (Accept all answers, but suggest that good leadership is a difficult attribute to describe; Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that a good king must a) know and sympathize with his subjects, b) have the resolve to send them to their deaths, and c) have the charisma to have them do so enthusiastically and victoriously.)

9. Tell students that whatever the real Henry V may have actually said before the battle, the words Shakespeare gave him have been learned rote by countless generations of English schoolchildren, for whom Agincourt has gone down as one of the most celebrated and heroic military victories in history. Given that Agincourt was the culmination of a dubiously justified military campaign of conquest in which Henry V had shown himself to be a brutal aggressor, ask students what they make of England’s veneration of Henry as a hero. (Accept all answers.) Provide a focus for the final video segment by asking students how long Henry V and England enjoyed the fruits of victory won at Agincourt. Play the video segment “Have We Learned Anything?” (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)

10. Review the focus question: How long did Henry V and England enjoy the fruits of victory won at Agincourt? (Henry was dead by age 35 and all of his achievements were lost by the end of his son’s reign.) Ask students if they think the epilogue, which reveals this at the end of Henry V, is nearly so well
remembered as Henry’s speech on the morning of the Battle of Agincourt. (No.) Why not? (Accept all answers, but encourage an understanding that humanity has traditionally not tended to dwell on the dismal deaths of anonymous soldiers on muddy battlefields like Agincourt; it is glory that inspires, and endures - even when we think we know better.)

**CULMINATING ACTIVITY**

1. Ask students if they feel the class has been discussing Henry V as a historical figure, or as a character from one of Shakespeare’s plays. (Explain that if their answer is “both,” they are no different than most people since Shakespeare’s day, for whom Henry V constitutes most of what they know of the real king.) Ask students if they can think of any artist, writer, or film director of their own time who have (or will have) a similarly influential impact on the history they interpret? (Accept all answers, but suggest that Stephen Spielberg is an example of a highly successful director who has based many of his greatest films on historical events and personalities.) Ask students to name a few of these films, and briefly describe the history they depict. (For example: Schindler’s List is about the Holocaust, Saving Private Ryan is about the D-Day invasion in World War II, Lincoln is about President Lincoln’s efforts to pass the 13th Amendment.) Ask students how much they think most people knew about any of these events before seeing Spielberg’s movies. (Accept all answers, but suggest that for many people, Spielberg’s films provide a glimpse into history they may not have otherwise known.) Explain that this is very much analogous to Shakespeare’s history plays both in his own time and in the centuries since.

2. Ask students to brainstorm what they find positive about people learning their history from Shakespeare’s plays, Spielberg’s films, or any other artist’s work - and what they find problematic. (Accept all answers, writing them on the board as they’re given. Positive responses should include a greater knowledge, understanding, and reference of history in popular culture; problematic responses should include the superficiality, selectiveness, and potential subjectivity of that knowledge.) Ask students to revisit the list they made in the Introductory Activity of “unjust” reasons for war. Can they think of any movies, books, or other works of art which celebrate soldiers who fought for such causes? (Accept all answers, but suggest that some of the most celebrated soldiers throughout history - from Alexander the Great to Napoleon to Robert E. Lee—fought for causes we would today consider unjust.)

3. Tell students that the French filmmaker François Truffaut once remarked that it was impossible to make a true anti-war film, because any cinematic depiction of war can’t help but be exciting and dramatic. Ask students if they think this is true and ask them to explain their reasoning. (Accept all answers.) Could the same be said of theater, and Shakespeare’s Henry V in particular? (Accept all answers, but suggest that in this lesson students have learned that whatever Shakespeare’s misgivings and ambiguities about the morality of war, he was well aware of its dramatic appeal, and his great English warrior king Henry V strikes a very delicate - and perhaps necessary - balance between excelling at the art of war and selling it.)