

Lights, Camera, Literacy!
High School Edition
Lesson #4 The Shopping Bag Lady
Teacher Notes w/ Links to Short Video Clips

Background: The Shopping Bag Lady, by Bert Salzman, first aired in 1975. The film won many awards and was considered to be ahead of its time with its portrayal of the homeless. The film was set in Manhattan's Central Park and tells the story of a teenage girl's encounter with a homeless old woman who carries all her belongings around in shopping bags and lives on the streets. This encounter eventually leads the teenage girl to empathize with the older homeless woman.

Questions:

1. Does the main character, Emily, change throughout this film? How?

Yes, she does change. She feels bad for the older woman and empathizes with her situation. She realizes she shouldn't judge others based on their situation in life. She decides to take an active role in helping the old woman after she was arrested and taken to the hospital.

2. What tips does the filmmaker give you about how Emily feels after her friend makes fun of her classmate? (This scene is from 1:45 to 2:15)

<https://youtu.be/qKUYCnkEKc0?t=1m41s>

The filmmaker combines literary (story) and cinematic elements (camera angles) in order to reveal Emily's true character. As the camera zooms in on Emily the viewer can clearly see she is uncomfortable with what just happened. The viewer gains insight into Emily's character thru the use of carefully crafted camera angles.

Ask the students if they remember other scenes that reveal Emily's character.

3. What examples of symbolism did you notice in the film?

symbolism: the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities

One example of symbolism in The Shopping Bag Lady is the reference to Alice in Wonderland. In the following scene the older woman is reading from Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll.. She's reading this passage as she stands next to a large Alice in Wonderland sculpture in Central Park (stop the scene at 8:00)

<https://youtu.be/qKUYCnkEKc0?t=6m17s>

Much like Alice, Emily is in the process of finding her place in a confusing world as a young girl growing up. This whole experience with the older woman ultimately changes Emily as she comes to empathize with the older homeless woman and begins to realize that everyone should be valued and treated with respect regardless of their position in life. Emily also gains a newfound connection with her own grandmother.

A second example of symbolism is the sequence of clips after Emily leaves the hospital and walks around the park alone.

<https://youtu.be/qKUYCnkEKc0?t=19m14s>

She sees her reflection in the water symbolizing her own reflections about what she has experienced after meeting Annie. Her image reflected off the water reflects her own internal reflections.

She walks over a bridge symbolizing her own transition into a better and more empathetic awareness of the world around her.

4. What possible themes can you identify in this short film?

One possible theme in The Shopping Bag Lady is: you should treat everyone with dignity and respect regardless of their place in society. This theme is

evident in the following scene where Emily learns about the old woman's past. (stop the clip at 16:00 as Emily looks at herself in the mirror).

<https://youtu.be/qKUYCnkEKc0?t=13m17s>

At 15:40 into the film Emily sees an image of the old lady when she was 14. What is the significance of this scene for Emily? And again, what tips does the filmmaker give the audience here? (The scene is from 14:50 to 16:02)