



***Empire of the Sun***  
Theme and Scene Analysis

An effective way to study film during a limited class period is to conduct a close analysis of a single scene. If they are not able to watch the film during regular school hours, insights can still be made by considering scenes as microcosms of the film as a whole. In order to gain a complete understanding of the film, it is necessary to view *Empire of the Sun* in its entirety, and students should be strongly encouraged to borrow the film from their local library or attend one of the free *One Film* screenings for extra credit. The following sets of questions study selected scenes in *Empire of the Sun* by paying special attention to the social and political themes that the scenes present. By answering these questions, students will be prompted to draw connections, recognize patterns, and make their own conclusions about the messages presented in *Empire of the Sun*.

**Themes: Imperialism and Class**

**Scene 5: Partygoer procession**

Jamie and his parents are chauffeured through the crowded streets of Shanghai to an exclusive, all-white costume party being held by a British family.

**Essential Questions:** Why do such stratifications happen in society? How do such imperialist relations develop?

**Discussion Questions:**

**Basic Understanding:**

Why does the father suggest taking the streets “to avoid the crowds?”

What do they see outside the car?

Why is it so crowded?

Why are there only white people riding in cars?

Why are the pedestrians being beaten back by police at the gate?

**Film Criticism:**

How does the music affect this scene? How does the music change between shots of the British in costumes and shots of the Chinese on the street?

How does color affect this scene? Where do you see color, and where do you not?

**Advanced Understanding:**

Compare and contrast the behavior of the Chinese servants at the house with the pedestrians in Shanghai.

Why is Jamie’s family so comfortable in their own home but uncomfortable during the car ride?

What does this scene suggest about the British Empire’s relationship with China?

**Scene 9: Engaging the Enemy**

Jamie fantasizes about being an air force pilot then stumbles upon a brigade of real Chinese soldiers.

**Essential Questions:** how do children perceive war? How do their perceptions differ from the real thing? Is it reasonable to allow children these fantasies?

**Discussion Questions:**

**Basic Understanding:**

What is Jamie’s reaction when he discovers the wrecked plane?

Is Jamie’s toy plane really flying around on its own?

Which army does Jamie imagine he is flying for?

Which army does Jamie discover over the hill – the Chinese or the Japanese?

Why does Jamie's father tell him "not to run" when he's coming back?

**Film Criticism:**

How does the music affect this scene? How does the music change between Jamie's reverie and his discovery of the soldiers?

**Advanced Understanding:**

Compare and contrast the "war" in Jamie's imagination and the "war" he discovers immediately after. How do his attitudes towards each differ?

Do you think Jamie was truly in danger? Do you think he was afraid?

**Scene 12: English Boy Surrenders**

Out of food at home, Jamie heads into the city and tries to "surrender" to the Japanese army, and is chased around town by hooligans.

**Essential Questions:** Who constitutes the "enemy" in a war? In wartime, what is the difference between a nation (in the abstract sense) and the citizens of that nation?

**Discussion Questions:**

**Basic Understanding:**

Why does Jamie go out into the streets?

Why does he tell everyone that he's British?

Why does he tell the marching soldiers that he surrenders? Why do they ignore him?

Why does he lie to the Chinese boy and say that his parents are going to pick him up? Why does he run away shortly after? What is he afraid of?

**Film Criticism:**

Symbols: In the middle of the scene, Jamie stands in front of a big poster of *Gone With the Wind*. What does this movie (specifically its title) suggest?

**Advanced Understanding:**

Why does Jamie believe that he will find help in Shanghai?

How does he react / do his actions change when he realizes that nobody cares?

**Themes: Imprisonment and Survival**

**Scene 16: New Occupants**

Basie teaches Jim the tricks to getting more food and drinking boiled water; Jim succeeds in fighting his way to become a person chosen to get on the truck.

**Essential Questions:** How does living in prison change a person? Can a moral code be followed even in such extreme conditions?

**Discussion Questions:**

**Basic Understanding:**

Why does Basie refuse to drink the water that came with his dinner?

How did Basie get an extra dinner plate? What does he instruct Jim to do?

What does Basie start doing to the corpse? Why does Jim tell him to stop?

How do people get on the truck?

Why does Basie ignore Jim when he gets picked and Jim doesn't?

How does Jim succeed in getting picked to get on the truck?

**Advanced Understanding:**

Do you think that Basie's approach to life in the camp is ethical? Do you think that Jim should take his advice?

Do you think that Basie is really Jim's friend, or is he using the boy for his own needs?

**Scene 18: The truck to Soochow**

The Japanese try to smash the hospital windows as retribution for allied bombings; Jamie saves the doctor's life while he is being beaten for defending the hospital.

**Essential Questions:** What is the best method of survival for a prisoner of war?

**Discussion Questions:**

**Basic Understanding:**

Why are the Japanese guards smashing windows?

Why does the doctor stand up to the guard?

What does Jim do that stops the guard from beating the doctor?

What do you think that Jim said to the guard in Japanese?

**Advanced Understanding:**

Who do you think is more honorable in their actions, the doctor or Jim? Who do you think does the right thing? Can you be honorable and do the right thing in this internment camp?

**Themes: National Identity and Loyalty**

**Scene 19: One with the Planes**

Jim watches the fighters practice a ritual ceremony with admiration, and salutes and sings to them, while other internment camp residents look on with disbelief.

**Essential Questions:** How do we develop our sense of national identity? Does sympathizing with the enemy equal treason?

**Discussion Questions:**

**Basic Understanding:**

What is the ritual that the pilots are performing? How do you know that it is serious?

Why does Jamie salute them?

Why are the other older residents surprised?

**Film Criticism:**

Music: compare and contrast the Japanese song at the ceremony and the song in Latin that Jamie sings. Do you think they go well together? Can they co-exist as music that honors the pilots, or are they too different?

**Advanced Understanding:**

Do you think Jamie understands that these are kamikaze pilots? Would he still honor them if he knew they were flying to their death? Or does he already know, and that is the very reason he salutes them?