



LESSON PLAN

Our Shared Humanity



RELATED FILM

My Enemy, My Brother

BY ANN SHIN



Key Idea

War can be one of the most negative reflections of humanity, involving unimaginable violence to human beings both physically and psychologically. When our shared humanity is recognized, deep connections can be built across cultural divides, which can support both inner and outer peace.

Background

The short film, *My Enemy, My Brother*, documents the relationship of two soldiers who first encounter each other in combat during the Iran-Iraq war. In 1982, 13-year-old Iranian soldier Zahed Haftlang met 18-year-old Iraqi soldier, Najah Aboud, in a bunker at the battle of Khorramshahr. Zahed, who was ordered to kill any surviving Iraqi soldiers, chose instead to save Najah's life. Twenty years later, the two men met again by chance in Canada.

The Iran-Iraq war lasted from 1980 to 1988, making it longer than both the first and second world wars. The war resulted in at least a million casualties on both sides and at least a half a million soldiers became permanently disabled. Iraq invaded Iran with the intent of settling long-term border disputes as well as becoming the dominant power in the Persian Gulf, but these goals were not achieved. The war ended with a United Nations brokered ceasefire in 1988, with the last prisoners of war exchanged in 2003.* According to scholar and political scientist, P.W. Singer, the first modern use of child soldiers in the Middle East occurred during this war, when Iran recruited soldiers ages 12 and above, pulling thousands of children from school. Singer estimates that approximately 100,000 Iranian boys lost their lives during the conflict.**

According to the International Red Cross, prisoners of war on both sides were treated inhumanely, conflicting with the Geneva Convention,*** and tens of thousands of Iraqi and Iranian soldiers were unaccounted for as late as 2008.****

*Robert Cowley and Geoffrey Parker, *The Reader's Companion to Military History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company 1996, pp. 228-229).



Film: 16 minutes

Class: 60 minutes

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- English Language Arts
- History
- Modern World Studies
- Psychology

COLLEGE

- English
- Film
- History
- Psychology

THEMES

- Heroism and bravery
- Overcoming adversity
- Violence versus peace
- Human rights

MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing film

PREPARATION

- None



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**P.W. Singer, *Children at War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles California: University of California Press, 2006, pp. 21-22).

***International Committee of the Red Cross, "[Treatment of Prisoners of War in the Iran-Iraq Conflict](#)." *Middle East Research and Information Project*, V.14, September/October 1984.

****"[Twenty years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, tens of thousands of combatants still unaccounted for](#)." International Committee of the Red Cross, October 16, 2008.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 (or 11-12) topics texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Psy.2.9-12. Investigate human behavior from biological, cognitive, and sociocultural perspectives.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the film by telling students that they will watch a real-life story about two soldiers who fought in the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s. Show students a map of the world, pointing out the two countries Iran and Iraq in the Middle East. Explain that the war was initiated by Iraq primarily to expand its power in the Middle East. One of the soldiers in the film acted heroically. He listened to his own instincts and performed an action against the orders of his superior officer, which he felt was the right thing to do.



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What does it mean to act heroically? *The Hunger Games*, *The Hobbit*, and *Star Wars* are some stories that contain a hero as a main character. In these stories, the hero faces danger and adversity, acts with bravery, and goes against the odds. Ask students: How would you describe a hero? Do you see heroes in your everyday life? If so, who are they?

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Explain to students that the film, *My Enemy, My Brother*, documents the unique relationship between two soldiers who first encounter each other in combat during the Iran-Iraq war. The film depicts the personal stories of two soldiers as well as the harsh circumstances and consequences of the war.

Direct students to watch the film noting the similarities and differences between the two soldiers, Zahed and Najah. What obstacles do the characters face and how do they respond?

Delving Deeper

After viewing the film, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- What do we learn about Najah and Zahed in the first scene of the film? (Answers: Najah is an Iraqi war veteran who served from 1980-1997. Zahed is an Iranian war veteran who served from 1982-1990.)
- How old were Najah and Zahed when they decided to join the war? What were the motivating factors that called Najah and Zahed to war?
- What technique did the filmmaker use to present the facts about the war?
- What did Zahed find inside Najah's pocket while they were inside the bunker? Why did seeing this item motivate Zahed to save Najah's life?



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- Conscience can be defined as an inner voice or feeling that guides one's behavior. Zahed made the decision to ignore the orders of his officer and act according to his own conscience, which saved Najah's life. What does it mean to act according to your own conscience? Do you think responding from one's conscience can encourage one to "do the right thing" even when under pressure to do something harmful? If so, how?
- This story reveals a remarkable moment of fate when the two soldiers meet twenty years later by chance in Vancouver, Canada. Did this unique moment in the film impact you as the viewer? If so, how?
- Documentary filmmakers use a variety of techniques to recreate events from the past that are important to include in the story. This film uses animated still photography from the war as a way to recreate the scenes. In an interview, filmmaker Ann Shin said that her goal was to recreate these scenes without being "cheesy," or unauthentic. Do you think she accomplished this goal? Why or why not?
- What did you like most about this film? Why? Would you recommend this film to others? Why or why not?

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. Joseph Campbell, author and American mythologist, is well known for creating a model that outlines the common journey of the archetypal hero. He wrote, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself." Describe how this quote relates to the film *My Enemy, My Brother*. How does Zahed give himself to "something bigger"? What does he attain from doing so? Think of a person you consider a hero. The person could be your art teacher, your mother/father, or a well-known leader, such as Gandhi. How has this person influenced your life? Has this person enabled you to think outside of yourself? If so, how? (CCSS.ELA.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1)



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2. In *The New York Times*, filmmaker Ann Shin describes that *My Enemy, My Brother* “transcends the cascade of often negative news coverage coming out of the Middle East. Against the backdrop of conflict, the story of Najah and Zahed is a surprising affirmation of humanity that cuts across political borders.” What do you think she means by “a surprising affirmation of humanity”? Do you think positive human characteristics (such as love, empathy, and compassion) have the ability to cut across other “borders,” such as gender, race, ethnicity, or different economic backgrounds? If so, how? Write a paragraph to explain your answer citing examples either from your own life or from a story in the media. (C3.D2.Psy.2.9-12)
3. Every year, the United Institute for Peace hosts a National Peace Writing contest. The Institute was created to “mitigate international conflict through nonviolent means.” Imagine you will submit a piece of writing for this contest. Write a paragraph describing Zahed and Najah’s story. How is their story an example of living in a nonviolent way? What do you think the filmmaker is telling the world by filming Zahed and Najah’s story? (C3.D2.His.3.9-12)

Resources

Ann Shin, “[My Enemy, My Brother.](#)” *The New York Times* Op-docs, May 13, 2015.

Charles Kurzman, “[Death Tolls of the Iran-Iraq War.](#)” University of North Carolina: Charles Kuarzman, October 31, 2013.

“[Detailed Timeline of Iraq History: Iran-Iraq War \(1980-88\).](#)” Word·ology.

(Interview) “[Katie Chats: HotDocs, Ann Shin, Director, My Enemy, My Brother.](#)” YouTube, April 25, 2015.

Joseph Campbell, ed. Phil Cousineau, *The Hero’s Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990).

Nancy Macdonald, “[His Brother’s Keeper.](#)” Maclean’s.