

*Harriet* (dir. Kasi Lemmons, 2019)

**Part I. Pre-Viewing Tasks**

1. Share an instance in which your prior experience motivated you to take action.
2. Summarize the following definition of a biopic in your own words:

“There is no film genre to which performance is as crucial as it is to the biopic. The genre’s appeal lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in life, known mostly in public, transformed into a character. Private behaviours and actions and public events as they might have been in the person’s time are formed together and interpreted dramatically. At the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatise actuality. The function of the biopic subject is to deliver the spectator a story. The genre’s charge, which dates back to its salad days in the Hollywood studio era [1930s-1940s], is to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology and to show why he or she belongs there.”

Dennis Bingham. “Living stories: Performance in the contemporary biopic.” *Genre and performance: Film and Television*. Ed. Christine Cornea. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. E-Book. n. pag. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526129833.00010>

**Part II.** Discuss your understanding and function of the characters in groups of 3 or 4. Please note that the characters in **bold red** are fictional. Why might the screenwriters have added them? Chose also from the other topics.

Araminta “Minty” Ross to Harriet Tubman (Cynthia Erivo)	<b>Gideon Brodess</b> (Joe Alwyn), Harriet’s former owner	Harriet’s visions	The film’s title
John Tubman (Zackary Momoh), a freedman and Harriet’s first husband	<b>Bigger Long</b> (Omar Dorsey) a notorious black slave-catcher	Harriet’s relationship to her mother	flashbacks
Rit Ross (Vanessa Bell Calloway), Harriet's mother	<b>Walter</b> (Henry Hunter Hall) a black slave-tracker who eventually supports Harriet	“They gonna sell me South.”	Harriet’s escape
Reverend Samuel Green (Vondie Curtis-Hall)	settings, e.g. Maryland Philadelphia, Canada	Harriet as Moses, an abolitionist and Underground Railroad conductor / Harriet as a superhero?	“Having a favorite slave is like having a pig. One day you might eat or sell it.”
William Still (Leslie Odom Jr.), the Philadelphia abolitionist	symbols	music, e.g. spirituals (Go Down Moses or Gospel Plow) or Stand Up	the impact of the Fugitive Slave Law
<b>Marie Buchanon</b> (Janelle Monáe), helps Harriet transition into her new life in Philadelphia	1-2 scene(s) that impressed you most	religion	What does the filmmaker want the viewer to do?
Jasper Marley (Rakeem Laws), the ship’s captain who helps the Underground Railroad	cinematography / acting / casting / lighting / colors / costumes	similarities and differences to other films on slavery that you’ve seen	the film’s ending
value of the insight the film provides	questions you have about the film	strengths / weaknesses of the film	a topic of your choice

### **Part III.**

- 1.** Report back to the seminar. Be prepared to discuss 1-2 insights from your discussion with the other seminar participants.
- 2.** Now go back and read the definition of the biopic again. Which apply to *Harriet*?
- 3.** Think about possible narrowly defined topics for an essay, e.g. the function of flashbacks in *Harriet*, or resilience in *Harriet*.