

The Testament of Ann Lee (2025) – Screenwriter's Breakdown for Educators

Screenplay By: Brady Corbet & Mona Fastvold

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Biography / Drama / History

LESSON PLAN

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PROFICIENCY: NOVICE | ADVANCED BEGINNER | **COMPETENT** | PROFICIENT | EXPERT

REQUIRED READING: The Testament of Ann Lee (2025) Screenplay (8FLiX.com [free account required for downloads]).

OPTIONAL READING: The Witch (2015 – Robert Eggers), A Hidden Life (2019 – Terrence Malick), Ida (2013 – Paweł Pawlikowski & Rebecca Lenkiewicz).

Logline

Ann Lee, the founding leader of the Shaker Movement, proclaimed as the female Christ by her followers. Depicts her establishment of a utopian society and the Shakers' worship through song and dance, based on real events.

What This Screenplay Teaches

The Testament of Ann Lee demonstrates how cinema can approach faith as lived experience rather than belief system. Instead of explaining doctrine, the screenplay dramatizes how trauma, repression, and bodily suffering evolve into ritual, theology, and communal order.

This is not a traditional biopic. It's a work of spiritual myth-making, asking how movements are born, how authority is claimed, and how personal pain becomes collective truth.

For writers, it's a rare example of historical storytelling that trusts form, repetition, and embodiment more than dialogue.

Discussion Topics

- Writing faith without endorsement or critique
- Ritual as narrative structure
- Trauma as the foundation of belief systems
- Gender, power, and spiritual authority
- Music as narrative language
- When character becomes symbol
- Audience patience and formal discipline
- The difference between explanation and experience

Tone Breakdown

Primary Tone: Ascetic Spiritual Intensity

Severe, disciplined, and emotionally controlled.

Secondary Tone: Ritualistic Musical Expression

Song and movement function as spiritual language rather than entertainment.

Tertiary Tone: Feminine Defiance Under Constraint

Resistance expressed through endurance, not rebellion.

Undercurrent: Trauma Transfigured Into Doctrine

Suffering is not escaped -- it is reorganized into belief.

In short:

Severe, hypnotic, devotional -- a historical drama that feels more like ritual than narrative.

Screenwriting Takeaways

- **Belief can be dramatized without explanation**

Faith is shown through action, repetition, and sacrifice.

- **Form communicates theme**

Structure mirrors spiritual discipline.

- **Music as theology**

Songs are acts of belief, not performance.

- **Minimal dialogue sharpens intention**

Silence and ritual do the narrative work.

- **Character as symbolic vessel**

Ann Lee functions as both person and principle.

- **Historical storytelling without modern psychology**

The script avoids contemporary emotional framing.

Critical Lens: What Works vs Where It Challenges Students

What Works

Formal discipline with purpose

- The screenplay's restraint isn't aesthetic posturing -- its rigor mirrors the spiritual control and self-denial at the heart of Ann Lee's belief system. Form and theme are inseparable.

Uncompromising tonal consistency

- The script never breaks its devotional severity, which builds trust and immersion. There's no tonal hedging to comfort the audience or dilute intent.

Embodied spirituality feels authentic

- Faith is expressed through bodies, labor, repetition, and suffering rather than abstract dialogue. Belief is something practiced, not explained.

Music integrated as belief, not relief

- Songs function as acts of worship and communal discipline, not emotional release or entertainment. They advance meaning rather than interrupt it.

Historical perspective remains intact

- The screenplay avoids modern psychology or contemporary moral framing, allowing the worldview of the period to govern character behavior and logic.

Where it Challenges Students

Deliberate austerity limits accessibility

- The same restraint that gives the film its power may challenge viewers accustomed to narrative momentum or emotional signposting.

Emotional distance may alienate some viewers

- By prioritizing ritual and symbolism over interior monologue, the screenplay keeps the audience at a contemplative distance rather than inviting intimacy.

Secondary characters function symbolically

- Many supporting figures serve thematic or communal roles rather than fully individualized arcs, which can flatten emotional texture.

Narrative momentum relies on submission, not suspense

- The screenplay asks the audience to surrender to rhythm and repetition rather than anticipate plot turns, a demanding approach that may frustrate expectation-driven viewers.

Why This Screenplay Matters for Students & Emerging Writers

This screenplay demonstrates that clarity of vision can outweigh accessibility. Its strengths and limitations are inseparable, making it ideal for teaching how artistic conviction shapes audience engagement.

It asks writers to consider:

- When restraint deepens meaning.
- When symbolism replaces psychology.
- How far form can carry story.

Writing Exercise (high impact):

Rewrite one ritual scene using:

- 1) Modern psychological dialogue, then:
- 2) Pure action and repetition.

Compare which version feels more truthful -- and why.

Legacy & Context

The Testament of Ann Lee aligns with formally rigorous historical works such as *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *The Witch*, *A Hidden Life*, and *Ida* -- films that treat belief as atmosphere rather than argument.

Its boldest choice is refusal: refusal to psychologize, to modernize, or to reassure. Instead, it invites the audience to submit to rhythm, mirroring the demands of the faith it depicts.

For screenwriters, it's an essential case study in how form itself can become ideology

Mentor Nick says:

“You don’t need to be spiritual to write metaphysical.”

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