

Sprockets

Toronto International FILM
Festival for children
April 14-18, 2008

A great deal of thanks and appreciation goes out to our teacher committees who volunteer their time to assist in the development of Sprockets lesson plans.

TITLE: Keith

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: USA

RELEASE YEAR: 2007

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE: English

DIRECTOR: Todd Kessler

RUNTIME: 97 mins

CURRICULUM LINKS: This lesson plan can help teachers meet the Media Studies Curriculum Requirements for the Media Studies sections of ENG1P/D, ENG2P/D, ENG3C/U and ENG4C/U. Please refer to Appendix 5 for specific Curriculum strands.

FOCUSING QUESTION: How effective is the characterization in this film?

SYNOPSIS:

Recommended for Grades 9 to 12

Natalie Anderson is not only popular and beautiful; she's got stellar grades, an endless roster of extracurricular activities and Raphael, the hottest guy at school, as her new boyfriend. Natalie's picture-perfect senior year would be flawless if it weren't for her chemistry partner: social outcast and unpredictable slacker Keith, who constantly avoids assignments and acts weird. Natalie knows that Keith is bright, however, and decides to go along with his pranks in order to get him to complete his share of their homework. According to her friends, who think Keith is

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way more trouble than he's worth, spending time with him is adversely affecting Natalie's "cool" factor, especially as her relationship with Raphael is heating up. But when Natalie discovers Keith is hiding a tragic secret underneath his tough exterior, her world changes irrevocably.

This exceptionally acted film explores the politics – and consequences – of high school's fickle social hierarchies. The film's unexpected plot twists offer valuable lessons about friendship and love in a poignant and memorable way. Set during a critical time in one brilliant teen's life, *Keith* is more than just a story about young adulthood; it is a powerful examination of individuality, the choices one makes and how being true to oneself is the only honorable way to live.

TEACHER ENDORSEMENT: "Brief instances of language, sexual situations, some mature themes (e.g. mental health, bereavement). Recommended for Grades 9–12. This film addresses a number of issues that adolescents can relate to: conflicts with parents, pressure to perform well in school/sports, the difficulties of thinking long-term about careers/studies beyond high school. However, the film also addresses a number of larger, more universal themes such as love, death, jealousy, success etc. which make the film a suitable study companion to most literary works covered in a high-school English course."

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY:

KEITH (2007)

BLUE'S BIG MUSICAL MOVIE (2000)

PRE-SCREENING PREPARATION:

The movie, *Keith*, is based on the short story by Ron Carlson. (See Additional Resources for bibliographical information.) Carlson is notorious for writing fiction that is very character-driven. Cut and paste the following excerpts – taken from a radio interview (available online at: <http://writersonwriting.blogspot.com/>) - on an overhead and discuss with the class.

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Ron Carlson's comments on his characters:

"The events [in my stories] are trying the characters, revealing the characters ... The characters are not advancing the plot."

Carlson wants to write about:

"Characters who bring their own baggage into the story."

Every story requires that: "the character has a life into which [a] problem has come."

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it important to have well developed characters in a story?
2. Are there any poems/stories/novels/plays/films that we have read/seen where the events help us understand a character better? Is this an effective story-telling technique? Why would writers put the emphasis on developing characters instead of plot?
3. What is the most interesting fictional character you have read/seen? Why is this character so intriguing to you? How did the writer/performer effectively reveal this character to you? Was it through speech/appearance/mannerisms? What could each of these things reveal about a character?

Possible extension activity:

Ask each student to write a brief description of an interesting character. (The description need only be a paragraph or two long. Accompanying sketches/illustrations are encouraged!) This character could be based on someone they know (a neighbour or relative – no classmates, please! – a celebrity, or a character from their favourite TV show/movie/book etc.) or a creation of their own. Students should be given approximately twenty minutes to complete this exercise. They should write/draw as much information as they can about this character, including the character's

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appearance, age, family history, job, likes/dislikes, motivations and personality.

Assign each student a partner. Give students a situation describing a chance encounter between two strangers (e.g. You are standing in line to buy movie tickets, and you start talking to the person beside you in line).

Ask the students to either: (1) write a dialogue/ mini script outlining the conversation or (2) act the conversation out, where each student is writing/speaking the part of the character they have just developed. The conversation must show authentic dialogue and describe/show the mannerisms and appearance of the character they have described. The students must **not** tell their partner anything about their character that does not come up in the conversation.

After twenty minutes, ask the pairs to split up and write down as much as they can about what they've learned about their partner's characters, including their impressions of them. After five minutes, the pairs reunite and they share their observations. Each student should listen to what their partner says about their character and then tell them how closely it matches their original description of the characters.

Reconvene the class and discuss the exercise.

Possible discussion questions:

1. Whose partner's characterization was effective? Why? What did your partner write/do to reveal their character to you?
2. How did you communicate information about your characters? Verbally? Physically? Why?
3. What information about your characters was the easiest to communicate? What information was the most difficult?

Discussion wrap-up:

Keith is a character-driven story. How effective is the characterization in the film? Give students list of questions (see below) to consider while watching the film.

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DURING SCREENING QUESTION/ACTIVITY:

Ask students to consider the following questions whilst viewing the film:

1. What is the film's attitude to the events and characters? Are they presented sympathetically/negatively/impartially?
2. What techniques are being used to achieve this?
3. Are you being asked to identify with any of the characters? Can you identify with any of the characters?
4. How do mirrors play a role in revealing the characters in the film?

POST SCREENING ACTIVITY:

Ask students to complete the Character Sheet (Appendix 1) to analyze the characters in *Keith*.

Lead a discussion on how effective the students felt the characterizations in the film are.

Are the characters believable?

How do they contribute to the story?

Could other characterizations have worked in the story?

How would the story change if the character "Keith" had been:

- Female?
- Wealthy?
- Romantic?
- Religious?
- Less intelligent?
- Popular?
- Older?
- Younger?
- African-American?
- Gay?

CONCLUSION/WRAP UP: Use this film and discussion as a means to critique the characterizations in other texts studied in the class.

SUGGESTED EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

1. Cut and paste the first five paragraphs of the following online MTV article (where Jesse McCartney (Keith) talks about altering his appearance for the role of Keith) onto a hand out for students:

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http://www.mtv.com/shared/movies/features/k/keith_set_visit_120805/

Lead discussion with students about what Keith's appearance contributes to the viewer's understanding of the character. E.g. How would our perceptions of the character be different if Keith had worn cleaner/trendier clothes?

2. Submit copies of "So Jealous" lyrics to students for discussion. (Appendix 2)

Preamble: Tegan and Sara are Canadian singer/songwriters (and identical twins) from Calgary. They started writing music when they were still in high school and many of their songs address issues of identity and belonging/exclusion. A number of their songs are featured on the soundtrack to *Keith*, including "So Jealous." "So Jealous" touches on a couple of the themes in *Keith*: jealousy and self-dislike.

Song's Context: Sara wrote this song when she was suffering from homesickness whilst separated from her sister, Tegan. During this time, Sara was living in Montreal and Tegan was living in Vancouver.

Please note that the song is available for download from iTunes:
<http://www.apple.com/search/downloads/?q=tegan+sara+so+jealous>

For suggested interpretation of lyrics see Appendix 3.

Read lyrics with students (and provide them with the preamble for the song as well as its context). Follow with suggested discussion questions:

- a. Are there any lines in this song that you feel sum up the feelings of jealousy? Which lines are they? Why do you think they are effective?
- b. Although the narrator does not use the word "guilt" in her lyrics, how do we know that she feels guilty about her jealousy?

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- c. Do you think that the narrator's expression of jealousy towards her sister is consistent with Keith's jealousy of Natalie? (i.e. Could Keith have written this song for Natalie?) Why or why not?
- d. Although everyone has experienced jealousy, it is still perceived to be a feeling that we should try and control. Is jealousy possible to control? Why/why not?

Suggested activities:

Ask students to write a reflection/creative piece on the theme of jealousy.

3. Ask students to complete the "Who's the Villain?" worksheet (Appendix 4). Discuss responses with students.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Carlson, Ron. "Keith." *The Hotel Eden*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998, c1997.

'MTV Website,' 2007, Larry Carroll, [Online] Available at:
http://www.mtv.com/shared/movies/features/k/keith_set_visit_120805/

'VCU Website,' 2007, *The Playwriting Seminars*, [Online] Available at:
<http://www.vcu.edu/arts/playwriting/modern.html>

'Writers on Writing Website,' 2007, [Online] Available at:
<http://writersonwriting.blogspot.com/>

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**APPENDIX 1: Character Worksheet
HANDOUT**

STUDENT

Character Name	Speech	Appearance	Mannerisms	Attitude
Keith				
Natalie				
Raphael				
Natalie's Parents				

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Which character did you find the most/least interesting? Why?

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Appendix 2: Tegan And Sara - So Jealous lyrics
HANDOUT

STUDENT

Artist: **Tegan And Sara**

Album: **So Jealous**

Year: 2004

Title: So Jealous

I don't want to be part of the problem
I try so hard to get roughed up
Fists on up, it looks that easy
It looks that way to me
It looks that way to you
But then there's you telling me I can
Then there's you screaming "say something"
I want the ocean right now
I want the ocean right now
I get so jealous that I can't even work
There I am in the morning
I don't like what I see
I don't know how it's become such a problem
Keep you up all night if I try to remain calm
How can they ask why I feel so angry
Do you see my problem if I never explain it
But then there's you asking me
"How long?"
"Say something"
It's taken me so long

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[So Jealous Lyrics online at: <http://www.lyricsmania.com/>]

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Appendix 3 – Interpretation of “So Jealous” lyrics RESOURCE

TEACHER

I don't want to be part of the problem
I try so hard to get roughed up
Fists all up, it looks that easy
It looks that way to me
It looks that way to you
But then there's you telling me I can
Then there's you screaming “say something”

The narrator (Sara) wants to admit to her feelings of jealousy, but she doesn't feel comfortable opening up: “I don't want to be part of the problem”. Instead she opts to look tough and “roughed up”, despite her sister telling her she “can [open up]” and urging her to talk about what's concerning her: “say something.”

I want the ocean right now
I get so jealous that I can't even work
There I am in the morning
I don't like what I see

The ocean is associated with the west coast/Vancouver which is where her sister is. (Although the ocean could also be a metaphor.) This is the start of the narrator's admission of jealousy. The narrator admits to the reader that she is so jealous of her sister that she can't concentrate on anything else including work. Despite being able to acknowledge her jealousy, however, the narrator admits she doesn't like this about herself.

I don't know how it's become such a problem
Keep you up all night if I try to remain calm

The narrator has tried to keep her feelings under control, but now people are beginning to notice that there's a problem. Her sister is particularly worried by the narrator's refusal to open up and admit what's wrong.

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How can they ask why I feel so angry?
Do you see my problem if I never explain it?

The narrator is upset that people don't understand why she feels the way she does. She feels that her sister should know her better and know why she is upset without having to tell her.

But then there's you asking me:
"How long?"
"Say something"

Her sister is persisting with the questions and getting the narrator to open up about how she feels.

It's taken me so long

Here the narrator is finally ready to open up to her sister and admit how she feels.

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APPENDIX 4: "Who's the Villain?" Worksheet
HANDOUT

STUDENT

"In the good old days, the conflict [in fictional works] nearly always hinged on a triangular relationship between three characters: the absolutely good Hero, the absolutely-purely-good Heroine, and the absolutely villainous Villain. **But now, with internalized villains, the Hero and Heroine are gone. They've been replaced by ordinary folks who are their own worst enemies. So they -- and you -- don't need villains anymore.**"

Source: The Playwriting Seminars [online] available at:
<http://www.vcu.edu/arts/playwriting/modern.html>

1. What do you think an "internalized villain" is?

2. List some stories in the space below where the characters have been archetypes (either purely good or purely bad):

3. Consider the characters in "Keith." Who is the villain? Who is the hero? Who is the victim?

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Villain _____

_____ Hero _____

_____ Victim _____

4. Could more than one character in the movie be the Villain/Hero/Victim? Explain?

APPENDIX 5 – Curriculum Strands within ‘Keith’ Lesson Plan TEACHER

REFERENCE

ENG1D/P & ENG2D/P & ENG3C/U & ENG4C/U - OVERALL EXPECTATIONS

FOR MEDIA STUDIES

- 1. Understanding Media Texts:** demonstrate an understanding of a variety of media texts;
- 2. Understanding Media Forms, Conventions, and Techniques:** Identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning;

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3. Creating Media Texts: Create a variety of media texts for different purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions, and techniques;

4. Reflecting on Skills and Strategies: Reflect on and identify their strengths as media interpreters and creators, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in understanding and creating media texts.