

Mean Creek

Studyguide



Mark Venner

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In creating art, I have always found that by focusing in on the details of a thing, you unearth universality and meaning. By focus, I mean pouring over a thing so many times that it bores you, confuses you and then eventually becomes new, and its meaning is multiplied to you for your work. In analyzing art, as you will in your program (TY Moving Image Module), it seems to me you have the same opportunity to expand your understanding through focus.

Jacob Aaron Estes

Director

Dear Teacher,

This studyguide has been devised for the Transition Year (TY) Moving Image Module, a project of the Arts Council Working Group on Film and Young People. The Module aims to promote the development of visual literacy through an active, pleasurable and creative engagement with moving image. In keeping with TY Guidelines, which suggest a curriculum that relates to the contemporary world outside school, the films chosen deal with themes relevant to the TY student. *Mean Creek* is a highly accessible film that belongs to the 'teen' genre, but it also offers an alternative to more mainstream teen films. This guide, written by Mark Venner, locates the film within the genre and gives a detailed analysis of first time director Jacob Aaron Estes' approach. A previewing worksheet, a focus on characters, themes and student explorations provide suggestions for classroom discussion and follow-up work.

In keeping with the concept of the Module, we recommend that you begin your work on *Mean Creek* with a shared viewing of the complete film, preferably in the cinema. We hope this guide will engage your interest and inspire your teaching of this gripping and challenging film.

Alicia McGivern

Senior Education Officer
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Writer – Mark Venner

Mark Venner was born in Kent in 1951 and came to Ireland in 1977 as a musician. He worked in the music industry throughout the eighties, managing various bands and promoting Cajun music in Ireland with his own travelling group The Wilf Brothers. In the late eighties he began a long association with Frontier Films, setting the questions for their successful RTÉ quiz show *Number 1* and stage managing *The Session* series of country music shows. For RTÉ he wrote *A Tree of Life* which was a series of ten short films for children's television. He has also co-written *A Year in the Life* diary with singer Marianne Faithfull, soon to be published by Forth Estate. Recently he devised and wrote the original story for *Fallout*, RTÉ's groundbreaking nuclear accident drama. He co-wrote the award winning feature film *Pavee Lackeen* with director Perry Ogden, and is now writing an adaptation for the screen of Alan Stanley's controversial civil war story *I met Murder on the Way*. A regular contributor to *Film Ireland* magazine, he is at present writing a monograph on *Gypsies and Travellers in Cinema*.

Introduction

Mean Creek (2005), from first-time director/writer Jacob Aaron Estes, is a chilling story that explores the moral dilemmas facing a group of teenagers in contemporary rural America. When a group of teenage boys and a young girl seek playful revenge on a boy who has bullied and tormented the youngest member of their gang, nothing turns out as expected. What begins as a river trip and a childish prank turns into a harrowing journey into the wilderness, culminating in a terrible event that forces the teenagers to grapple with the meaning of friendship and responsibility. *Mean Creek* begins as a search for personal redemption and leads inexorably to a tragic conclusion that will haunt the teenagers' lives forever. Although a very accessible film, the unfolding story manages to skillfully illuminate the central themes of bullying, revenge and morality, without losing the momentum of a gripping tale of modern adolescence adrift in a confusing world.

Credits

Sam	Rory Culkin
Clyde	Ryan Kennedy
Marty	Scott Mechlowicz
Rocky	Trevor Morgan
George	Josh Peck
Millie	Carly Schroeder
Director/Writer	Jacob Aaron Estes
Producers	Rick Rosenthal, Susan Johnson and Hagai Shalam
Cinematographer	Sharone Meir
Production Designer	Greg McMickie
Costume Designer	Cynthia Morrill
Editor	Madeline Gavin



The actors and director

THE ACTORS

Rory Culkin (Sam)

Thirteen-year-old Rory Culkin was born in New York. The seventh child of a family of seven, his eldest brother, Macaulay, became a world famous child star in the early nineties with his roles in the *Home Alone* films. Rory's first film appearance was in *The Good Son* followed by *Getting Even With Dad*. More recently he has starred opposite Mel Gibson in the science fiction blockbuster *Signs*, as well as starring in the comedy hit *Igby Goes Down*. His most recent films are *Mean Creek* and *In Control of All Things*.



Ryan Kelley (Clyde)

Up-and-coming young actor Ryan Kelley would be known to Irish teenagers for his portrayal of Ryan, a mysterious, recurring character in the hit TV series *Smallville*. Prior to his role in *Mean Creek* he played the lead role in *The Dust Factory*, a film yet to be released in Ireland. Recently the *Hollywood Reporter* named Ryan on their 'Ones To Watch' list, placing him with a select group of young actors who are expected to go on to great success in the film industry.

Scott Mechiowicz (Marty)

Newcomer Scott Mechiowicz graduated from the UCLA Acting Program in May 2003 and landed the lead role in a Dreamworks film *Eurotrip*. Immediately after production in Prague, Scott flew to Oregon to begin filming on *Mean Creek*. Scott was born in Texas, brought up in New York, and moved to Los Angeles in 2001 to study acting at UCLA.

Trevor Morgan (Rocky)

Trevor Morgan began his acting career at the age of five, appearing in a string of advertising commercials on American television. He won the lead role in the movie *Family Plan* and hasn't stopped working since. Alongside *Mean Creek* his film credits include *The Sixth Sense* and *The Patriot*.

Josh Peck (George)

Josh Peck began his acting career on US television with appearances on *ER*, *The Guardians* and the pilot for the hit series *The Sopranos*, as well as co-starring in *The Amanda Show*. He then appeared in several feature films including *Snow Day* and *Spun*. After starring in *Mean Creek* in 2004, Josh landed his own TV show *Drake and Josh* on the Nickelodeon Channel. A keen mini-dv enthusiast, Josh did all his own camerawork in *Mean Creek* when shooting George's video diaries.



Carly Schroeder (Millie)

Thirteen-year-old Millie Schroeder is already a screen veteran with dozens of roles on US television, including appearances in over 480 episodes of the *General Hospital* soap opera over the past six years as Serena Baldwin. Young Irish audiences might know her for her role in the hit TV series *Dawson's Creek*. Carly has also provided her voice in two hit movies *Babe: Pig In The City* and *Toy Story 2*. She says that filming *Mean Creek* was the best experience of her life.

THE DIRECTOR – JACOB AARON ESTES

Mean Creek is the first feature from writer/director Jacob Aaron Estes. His first draft of the *Mean Creek* screenplay garnered him an invitation to the renowned Eugene O'Neil Theatre Center's National Playwright Conference where he developed and completed the script. He was then accepted into the American Film Institute's directing program, and it was whilst studying here that his screenplay for *Mean Creek* brought him attention from Hollywood. But in the wake of the tragic events at Columbine High School, Estes' unblinking tale of teenagers facing the aftermath of violence seemed too risky a subject for Hollywood to tackle, and he failed to find backing for the script. Undaunted by this setback, the young filmmaker decided he would attempt to make the movie himself. He brought the film to the newly-formed Whitewater Films, a production company devoted to giving a voice to first-time directors. They were thrilled to have the opportunity to work with Estes as a writer and director. After seven years of false starts, Whitewater Films said yes to this difficult and risky project. The risk certainly paid off – *Mean Creek* is a highly accomplished debut film by any reckoning and is set to become a cult favorite among teenagers in the US and Europe.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Are you familiar with any of the actors' other work? Do you think there are any similarities in the roles they have played?
2. What do you think of Estes as a first-time director?

Synopsis

Set in a small farming town in north-west Oregon, shy Sam (Rory Culkin) confesses to his protective older brother Rocky (Trevor Morgan) that he is getting beaten up daily by the towering school bully George (Joshua Peck). Together, with Rocky's pals Marty (Scott Mechlowicz) and Clyde (Ryan Kelly), the boys plan the perfect payback, inviting George on a birthday river trip tailor-made to end in the bully's humiliation. Sam's new girlfriend Millie (Carly Schroeder) joins the journey, which starts almost immediately with misgivings and apprehensions. Seeing George in a new light, as a lonely, overweight kid with learning difficulties who is desperate for attention and friendship, Sam wants to call the whole thing off. But the plan is already in motion. It's too late to back out.

The teenagers begin their river journey. The boat glides through the stunning Oregon landscape, and at first everything seems idyllic and tranquil as the kids indulge in friendly banter and horseplay. When they pull up at the river's edge for a packed lunch, Rocky takes Marty aside and tries to persuade him to call off the plan. Marty refuses, saying he always likes to see things through. Back on the boat, George, still totally unaware of what lies in wait for him, taunts various members of the group. Marty suggests a game of truth and dare. When it comes to George's turn he asks for the truth. Marty tells him the reason why they brought him out onto the river. George is stunned at this betrayal and becomes very agitated and confused. He verbally abuses all of them, one by one. He then turns on Marty and repeatedly taunts him about his father's suicide. Marty becomes enraged and makes a lunge at George. In the resulting scuffle George is accidentally knocked into the river by Rocky. They all watch as George sinks below the surface. Rocky realises that George is drowning and jumps in to save him. George's body suddenly floats to the surface, and Rocky drags him to the water's edge. Millie frantically tries to revive George but it is too late. He is dead. They are all deeply traumatised; Sam vomits and Clyde lies down next to George's body in distress.

Marty hatches a plan. They must pull themselves together and bury the body. The other kids don't want to go along with Marty's plan, but his forceful character overpowers them and they drag the body into the woods and bury it. On the journey home Marty makes them all agree to a pact of silence. If no one talks nothing can be proved. That night they meet without Marty in Rocky and Sam's house. Marty turns up, and he realises that they have come to a decision to tell the truth about George's fate. Marty storms off. He takes his older brother's gun and robs a local store before driving off into the night. The others knock on the door of George's house; his mother answers.

A police launch travels down the river at dawn. On the launch with the police officers are Sam and his father, together with George's shocked mother. Sam shows the police where George's body is buried.

Previewing sheet



In the poster for *Mean Creek* we see a group of young people by a river. One of them faces the camera, the others have their backs to the cameras and one is standing. They appear to be dressed casually, the dominant colour is blue/green.

1. What is your first impression of this film from the poster? Describe the different elements of the poster and say how they contribute to your impression.
2. What does the title of the film suggest to you?
3. What kind of audience do you think would be attracted to this film? Explain your answer.
4. After you have watched the film, do you think the poster was effective? Why/Why not? What, if anything, would you change?
5. How would you market this film?

Background to story

Mean Creek tells the story of a group of American teenagers whose lives are dramatically changed when they decide to seek revenge on a boy who has consistently bullied the youngest member of their gang. Estes used his own experience of being bullied during his school years as inspiration for the story. When playing basketball on the local court he found himself playing against an aggressive opponent who taunted him and attempted to injure him at every opportunity. The bully would intimidate and verbally abuse him. In interviews the director recalls how this bully inspired a lot of anger in him, which soon gave way to elaborate revenge fantasies.

Estes' reaction was not unusual – often victims of bullying harbor secret fantasies of revenge against the perpetrator. But it is rarely that these fantasies are acted upon. He says that the only revenge plots he acted on were of a creative, non-violent nature. However, the more he sought his revenge in this way, the worse things got for him. When it began to get out of hand, he started to wonder about the guy who was the bully: Who was he? Why was he doing this? And why had he let him have such a profound effect? For Estes these were really interesting questions - and they became more interesting than just getting back at the bully.

GEORGE THE BULLY



Working his own experiences of bullying into the story, therefore, it is George's persistent bullying of Sam that instigates the fateful day out on the river. However, Estes' idea was to turn the typical notion of

a black-and-white bully on its head. He created the deeply complex character of George, who seems at first to be a detestable villain, then a sad and damaged social outcast, and finally the catalyst who changes the lives of the kids around him, whether defender or attacker. Estes wanted to explore the bully as a human being rather than just the typical bad guy. George is someone who desperately wants to be a part of something – he's just like the others in the group.

THE TEENAGE WORLD

Mean Creek is not only about bullying. Director Estes was interested in the lives of young people in today's world. He wanted to explore how they cope with making tough decisions, how they develop a real sense of morality in a

world filled with moral ambiguity. Further inspired by classic cinematic tales of modern adolescence – from *River's Edge* to *Stand by Me* – Jacob Estes also wanted the story to expose the complexity, intimacy and intelligence of the teenage world. He wanted to explore a world inhabited by the kind of young people he remembered from his own teenage years. He wanted to see how young people like these would behave under intensely difficult conditions - how their sense of duty, their relationships and loyalties to one another could be tested in an extremely stressful, dramatic situation.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

(Read the info box overleaf)

1. What do you think of Estes' reaction to his own experience of bullying?
2. Why do you think George bullied Sam?
3. Why do you think people bully?
4. George is not the only bully in *Mean Creek*. Can you think of any others? What do they do?
5. What do you think of Estes' version of a teenage world? Compare his interpretation with other films/books you know. Are there common themes? Which do you prefer?
6. Read the Info Box overleaf. How could film/TV respond to the problem of bullying in an effective way?



BULLYING IN IRELAND

Bullying is a behavioral problem which affects the lives of many school children and their families in Ireland. The humiliation, fear, social isolation and loss of self-esteem which children experience when bullied can often result in absenteeism from school, poor schoolwork, personality changes and depression.

Most people are aware that bullying exists; yet this behaviour often remains largely unchallenged until it manifests itself as either directly impacting on someone we know and care about, or as a problem that has **become** too serious to ignore. National and international research has shown that bullying knows no boundaries of age, sex or social-economic **background**. It can take many forms, it can be short term, or continue over long periods, even years.

The Nationwide Study of Bullying in Irish primary and post primary schools conducted by Trinity College¹ indicates that some 31% of Primary students and 16% of Secondary students have been bullied at some time. From our 870,000 school-going population, approximately 23% or 200,000 children are at risk of suffering the ill effects of bullying.

Bullying not only affects schoolchildren. It occurs in all aspects of society, and affects many adults in the workplace.

WHY DO SOME YOUNG PEOPLE BULLY?

There can be many reasons. The bullies are often youngsters who don't fit in: and they in turn beat up, ridicule, intimidate and psychologically torment others who don't fit in. It's a vicious circle, fuelled to some degree by a youth culture **characterized** by rampant consumerism, questions of sexuality and peer-group pressure to dress and act like everybody else.

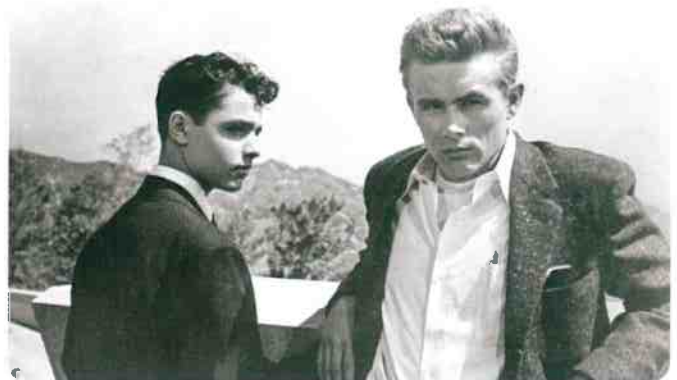
TEENAGERS ON FILM

There has been a long tradition of films aimed at teenagers dating back to the era of James Dean in the 1950s. *Mean Creek* belongs to this tradition of teen-orientated, coming-of-age cinema where we see young people navigate the difficult territory of their teenage years.

TEEN REBELS

It is often argued that the "teenager" is essentially a post second world war phenomenon; that prior to World War II there was only childhood and adulthood. In literature, J.D. Salinger articulated archetypal teenage concerns such as distrust of adults and their values in his classic 1952 novel, *Catcher in the Rye*. Historians argue that the year 1955 saw the explosive discovery of teenage identity, which seemed to coincide with an era of new prosperity when young people had a disposable income for the first time.

In the USA and Europe, there was a growing awareness of this burgeoning gap between adults and teenagers in the early fifties, through a bewildering and disturbing increase in juvenile crime and delinquency. Crimes by teenage offenders in Britain rose from 24,000 in 1955 to 45,000 in 1959².



This notion of the modern youth as the troubled and angst ridden "teenager" would inevitably be exploited by Hollywood. 1955 was the year of *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, which starred James Dean, whose tragic death in the same year inaugurated a posthumous cult. In this climate of emerging teenage self-consciousness James Dean became youth's first symbol of rebellion. He distilled the essence of youthful non-belonging for youngsters everywhere between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one. His role in *Rebel Without a Cause* is that of a teenage loser, kicked in the face by adults but responding heroically to the different emerging values of his own age group.

¹ See www.ABC.tcd.ie/school

² *The Fifties* – Peter Lewis

OTHER TEEN STORIES

The fifties trend for teen problem movies inspired by *Rebel Without a Cause* continued on well into the sixties. In Britain the social realist "kitchen sink" films of the early sixties inspired Ken Loach in his classic adaptation of Barry Hines' novel *Kestrel Without a Kneve*. *Kes* featured

an extraordinary naturalistic performance from 13-year-old David Bradley as a young schoolboy who attempts to escape the tedium of his dull working class life by training a kestrel that he finds.

This groundbreaking film is a moving examination of the narrow options open to those youngsters living on the margins of modern society. *Kes* is major influence on many subsequent films dealing with adolescence, and certainly the naturalistic performances of the teenagers in *Mean Creek* are indebted to Ken Loach's groundbreaking approach to film acting. The recent Irish film, *A Mighty Celt*, also bears the stamp of *Kes* with its tender and realistic portrayal of a Northern Irish boy who befriends a greyhound.

MIXED GENRE

By the seventies and eighties, films depicting teenage life broadly embraced many genres from the horror movie to the romantic comedy. In 1984 John Hughes inaugurated the eighties Brat Pack movie with *The Breakfast Club*, which explored the interweaving lives of five teenage students at a middle class high school. Francis Ford Coppola's adaptations of S.E. Hinton's cult teenage novels *Rumblefish* and *The Outsiders* were released back to back in 1983, and Jonathan Kaplan's classic *Over the Edge* (1980) featured a 14-year-old Matt Dillon in his first starring role. This cult teen-movie tells the story of a group of bored teenagers living in a purpose-built town set in the barren Arizona desert. Here the parents are too busy working to pay attention to their teenage kids' needs; there are no facilities for the teenagers, and the local youth recreation center closes at six. Unsupervised, the frustrated kids spend their time drinking, taking drugs and falling foul of the local police sergeant. *Over the Edge* was written by another first time screenwriter Tim Hunter, who five years later wrote and directed *River's Edge* (1986) which was a direct influence on Jacob Estes' screenplay for *Mean Creek*.

Rob Reiner's highly regarded teen movie *Stand By Me* (1986), was also a major influence on *Mean Creek*, and elements from Peter Brook's adaptation of *Lord of the Flies* can also be seen in the story. In both these movies, as in *Mean Creek*,

adults are rarely seen, and appear only at the end after cataclysmic and violent upheaval has sent events spinning wildly out of control.

CONTEMPORARY FILMS

In recent years there have been many perceptive and popular films that explore the lives of teenagers – American films such as *13* and *Clueless*, and from Ireland *Last of the High Kings* and *Disco Pigs*. In contemporary films such as *Mean Girls*, teenagers can often be represented as self-absorbed and image conscious. But many of the recent movies for this age group – among them *10 Things I Hate About You*, *The Faculty*, *Cruel Intentions* and *American Pie* – seem to have a more realistic grasp of the complexities of modern life than many contemporary movies aimed at adults, in that they deal with real issues that affect teenagers in their day-to-day lives. One of the most remarkable films of recent years, *Donnie Darko*, was a much darker contemplation of teenage experience from another first-time director, Richard Kelly. In this film, a troubled teenager is driven to manipulate a complex chain of events that will change the destinies of himself and those around him.



The lives of modern teenagers are also the subject of many TV programmes. The complexities of family life for adolescents have been the subject of highly popular and long-running American TV series such as *Seventh Heaven* and *Dawson's Creek*. Even comedies like *Malcolm In The Middle*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Oliver Bean* often deal with realistic situations and issues regarding the complexities of teenage life. Several members of the young cast of *Mean Creek* started their acting careers appearing in such US television shows.

SERIOUS ISSUES

Like *Mean Creek*, many of the modern films that are targeted at a teenage audience deal with serious everyday issues. These films often end with a character having made a

The World of Mean Creek

positive transition from one stage of life to another. The conflict that troubles them during the course of the film is usually resolved and they are able to live their lives more fully and freely as a result. This is what makes them appealing to teenagers. Although *Mean Creek* is arguably not a typical model for this kind of film, the characters are forced to make a transition, but the ending doesn't necessarily hint at a happier future for the youngsters. These kids have been through a life-changing trauma that will inevitably stay with them for the rest of their lives. How each of them will cope with such an event is perhaps the question one asks after watching the film.

On one level *Mean Creek* is a very entertaining adventure story, but it also takes a deeper look at the big choices that we all face in life. It is very challenging and gritty, but has a very positive message about the struggle to do the right thing.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. What other films have you seen that depict teenage life?
2. Is this genre of film popular among your peers? Why/not?
3. So many films are targeted at the fifteen to twenty-five age group – which genres do you think are most popular among this group?
4. If you were creating a version of your own teenage world, how would it look? What themes would you deal with?
5. Do you think films are a useful way of tackling serious subjects? Do they affect people's behaviour, do you think?

SUGGESTED FURTHER VIEWING

Lord of the Flies (Peter Brook, 1963)

Stand By Me (Rob Reiner, 1986)

Kes (Ken Loach, 1970)

Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly, 2001)

(All available on DVD)

VISUAL STYLE AND SETTING

A feature film is a story told through a visual medium. The lighting, camera movement, set design, costumes and make-up all contribute to the 'visual style' of a film and together with the music and sound design, combine with the plot to make an important contribution to our understanding of the narrative.

The world of *Mean Creek* is presented as a river journey, where we follow a group of teenagers adrift both physically and morally. The director uses a gritty and authentic style to document this harrowing journey into the wilderness. He uses a fluid hand-held camera, keeping very close to the actors. This technique can be seen in many modern low-budget and independent films, as well as in contemporary TV shows such as *ER* and *23*.

Mean Creek's unusual raw style has the effect of setting the audience adrift with the characters. This enables the director to get in very close; here the distance between the actor and the performance is totally collapsed – they seem to 'become' the characters. They don't look rehearsed and seem to be speaking their own words. This technique, borrowed from documentary films, enables the film to present an authentic and realistic portrait of these youngsters.

THE SETTING

There are two distinct locations in *Mean Creek*: the town and the river. The town is glimpsed as a small rural community, with a high school, gas station, grocery store and local bar. Roadside signs tell us that it is a farming community, and the modest wooden houses indicate that the community is certainly not wealthy. The setting tells us that these are normal kids living in a recognisable world; it is a world that the young viewer can recognise as the world he or she lives in, where kids go to school, hang out at each other's houses and discuss things that teenagers like to talk about.



Key Scene Analysis

The surrounding countryside is first glimpsed from George's bedroom window. We can see high snow-capped mountains in the far distance. The stunning pastoral of the Oregon setting is then gradually revealed on the river journey. Here the film's music soundtrack uses a haunting repetitive theme to underscore and undermine the often beautiful images of dappled sunlight on the water, herons wading at the river's edge and deer peering out of the dense woodland as the boat passes by.

LIFE'S JOURNEY

The idea of a physical journey as a metaphor for life's journey is a theme that occurs often in film and literature. Most stories take the hero out of the ordinary world into a 'special world', where he or she crosses a threshold, confronts an enemy and then returns, changed forever by the experience of the journey.

Mean Creek certainly fits into this model or form of storytelling, and it's worth noting that this approach to film narrative has its origins in Joseph Campbell's study of classic mythology, *The Hero's Journey*, where Campbell suggests that all storytelling is based on a set of principals that govern life; that there is a pattern to our lives that is a journey common to us all.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. What do you think of the style that is used in the film? Is it effective?
2. Pick out a scene that is particularly good, in your opinion. Describe its style.
3. Can you think of any other TV programmes or films that use a similar style? What effect do they have on the viewer?
4. How does the world of this film compare with (i) your own (ii) other worlds as presented in teen films?
5. Is the use of journey as metaphor for life a good one? Can you think of other examples in film or literature?

In order to examine a scene in detail, we need to understand how it contributes to the complete film. Feature films are usually made up of three acts. Each act comprises several distinct sequences, and these sequences break down into a series of scenes.

WHAT IS A SCENE?

A scene is a complete dramatic unit. It is composed of separate *shots*. The scene moves the story forward in terms of plot and character. Each scene is usually motivated by the previous scene, and creates anticipation for the next.

A scene can be of any length. It can be a three-minute dialogue scene in a café, or just a single shot like a schoolboy waiting at a bus stop.

When you think of a good movie, you remember *scenes*, not the entire film.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS:

1. What is your favourite scene from *Mean Creek*? Explain.
2. Are there any scenes in the film that you don't like? Explain why.

THE KEY SCENE: "Why did you drop anchor?"

Most modern feature films have a *key scene*. This is usually the scene which defines the movie, and is often the most memorable scene in the film.

The world of *Mean Creek* is realised in the dynamics between the youngsters – the shifting inter-personal relationships between them all. This is vividly illustrated in the film's key scene, the fifteen-minute build-up to George's tragic drowning.

ANALYSIS

The key scene in *Mean Creek* begins when the group drop anchor in the middle of the river. The boat is motionless in the water as the *camera* encircles them. The director is telling us that they are trapped. There is no escape now, no going back on their plan. We can feel that the mood has changed. The *music* has stopped, and the sense of impending doom is developed as the camera *cuts* to the tense faces of the group, one by one. But George is oblivious to the mood. He unpacks the water gun,

fills it from the river and blasts Rocky in the face. The silence is broken and Rocky explodes with rage.

The director is now skillfully unfolding the scene. Marty suggests a game of "truth or dare", and George says "Yeah...love to!" Sam and Millie say "Let's not". They want to stop the game altogether. See how the *tension* is built here. All the while the camera is in the boat with the gang – it is part of the *action* – cutting back and forth between the characters as the tension gradually builds. We can see how George is oblivious to his impending fate. Clyde doesn't want to play the game either. George mocks the three who won't play, and seals his fate. This is very skilful filmmaking here, and we the viewers find ourselves complicit in what is going on.

"Go ahead Clyde. Start the game."

We too are trapped on the boat as the director cuts to a *close-up* of Millie. She says, "Go ahead Clyde. Start the game." As the game begins we see how George is now physically separate from the group. He is in the stern of the boat, and the camera looks over his shoulder to the rest of the group. We are being made to identify with George as we now see the group from his *point-of-view*.



Marty tells George the truth, the reason why they brought him out on the river. George is stunned as he realises that the boat trip is a complete set-up, and that it's not even Sam's birthday. He begins to act very aggressively. He stands up and verbally insults the group one by one. He then turns on Marty mocking him about his father's suicide. Marty becomes enraged and loses control. He lunges at George and there is a scuffle as Rocky tries to restore order. George falls back and tumbles into the water.

As George sinks to the bottom of the river we find ourselves suddenly seeing him through the lens of his own video camera. Rocky dives in attempting to save the drowning boy. Only now does the haunting *theme music* return.

The camera is now in the water with Rocky as he desperately tries to find George. Then the body surfaces at the river's edge. We now know that George has drowned. The others pull George into the shallows. Millie knows first aid and tries to revive him. Clyde screams out for help as the director cuts to a *long shot* of the empty river winding far away through the dense forest – there is no one to help them. We cut back to Millie as she attempts mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Here the director accentuates the urgency with a series of quick *cuts* and very tight *close-ups*. The camera then pulls back and we see the group gathered around the body. A stunned silence. Everyone is in total shock. The silence is suddenly broken as Sam vomits. Music fades in as the camera pulls back on George's body lying in the mud with Clyde leaning forlornly over him.

This concludes the scene – a harrowing and emotionally gripping piece of filmmaking, set almost entirely on the boat. We have witnessed all the characters responses as the scene unfolds. And we have been drawn into the action by the filmmaker's skilful use of camera and *editing* techniques.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

Watch this scene through again. As you watch this sequence write down

- (a) what happens
- (b) what camera positions and movements are used
- (c) any other techniques the director uses to convey *atmosphere* and *meaning*.

Choose a key scene from your favourite film – watch it in the same way. How effective is this scene in defining your film?

Mean Creek – the performances

Mean Creek is a highly accomplished film. The direction, screenplay, cinematography, editing and music all mesh seamlessly together in a way that is gripping and complex. But many critics have argued that the film's real strength lies in the extraordinary performances of its six main actors, all of them in their teens. This type of film is sometimes called an 'ensemble' film. This means that the story is about the interaction of a small group of characters, rather than being about one character.

A GROUP OF FEARLESS YOUNG ACTORS

From the start, Jacob Aaron Estes and his producers knew that *Mean Creek* would hinge on finding a group of young actors who could embody the naturalism and emotional honesty required of the characters. Over the course of six months, some 500 young actors were auditioned.



Rory Culkin – Sam

Rory Culkin was the first actor to be cast in *Mean Creek*. His role as Sam is central to the story - he is the kind-hearted and gentle schoolboy, who unwittingly sparks the revenge plot that gets out of hand. Rory's remarkable performance as this sensitive boy is totally convincing; - his subtle portrayal of Sam is always restrained and understated. Even when he is being terrorised by George in the school playground, he holds back from histrionics or melodrama.

Josh Peck – George

Josh Peck said in an interview 'I've never been the coolest kid around, but I don't mind. I've realized that it's often better to be original'. In *Mean Creek*, Josh plays the overweight school bully George, the key role in the movie. Director Estes knew that he had to find a brilliant young actor for this very difficult and challenging role, and he has said in interviews that if he hadn't found Josh, he could never have made the film. Josh's performance as George is a stunning achievement. He captures perfectly the complexities of George's character - the combination of sadness, ugliness and vulnerability.



Scott Mechlowicz – Marty

A new face in film, Scott Mechlowicz' portrayal as the troubled Marty has a smouldering intensity that recalls James Dean back

in the 1950's, or recent movie stars such as Matt Dillon or Brad Pitt. He has an indefinable quality which is often labeled 'screen presence' or 'star quality'. Like George, Marty is a complex character who throughout the course of the film is often unsympathetic and yet is obviously vulnerable and damaged. Scott very skillfully allows the viewer to empathise with Marty who can be a bully and yet is vulnerable and sensitive at the same time.

Carly Schroeder – Millie

Millie is the one female among the boys and she was the last person to be cast in the film. Carly Schroeder, as Sam's conscientious young girl friend, brilliantly portrays the essence of being thirteen. Here is a young girl on the cusp of innocence and the angst of adolescence. Carly plays Millie very naturally with an unusual combination of self confidence and childishness. Again this performance is very subtle and



understated, and Carly's years of experience as a child actor enable her to chart the changes Millie makes in the course of the journey with great realism and conviction.

Trevor Morgan – Rocky

It could be easy to overlook the character of Rocky, Sam's older brother in *Mean Creek*. But in fact Rocky, as played by Trevor Morgan is in many ways as complex a character as the other kids. Trevor plays Rocky as a caring and decent older brother, and yet it is Rocky who instigates the entire revenge plan, and it is Rocky who cannot stand up to his pal Marty's bullying ways. Trevor Morgan very cleverly builds a rounded and totally believable portrait of Rocky, right down to his very irritating way of laughing. This young actor totally inhabits his role, and brings Rocky vividly to life as a decent yet sometimes weak character. It is Rocky however who jumps into the river, attempting to save George.

Ryan Kelley – Clyde

Clyde is the most withdrawn member of the group. As played by Ryan Kelley he is a deeply caring and sensitive youngster. He too has been bullied - in the past by George and in the present by Marty. Ryan brilliantly captures the essence of this boy: an honest kid with a firm grasp of what is right and wrong, whose gentle manner and unconventional home life leave him open to questions about his sexuality. Again Ryan's performance is very subtle and understated, and although Clyde is a reserved youngster, we learn much about him from the way he observes all that is going on around him.

Student Explorations

1. Who is your favourite character in *Mean Creek*?
How would you describe their performance in the film? Why do you find them particularly interesting?
2. Reading through the character descriptions above, do you agree/disagree with these accounts?
3. Could you see any other actor in any of these roles? Who? Would they be better?
4. What kind of casting decisions were most difficult in this film, do you think?
5. How do you think the characters work together as a group in the film?
6. Who are the best young actors working today, in your opinion? Do you have a favourite actor from older films? How does their style compare with contemporary actors?
7. Do you think any of these actors has star quality? If so, what is this?
8. Who is the greatest movie star in your opinion? Who is the most memorable film character?

Credits

Mean Creek, directed by Jacob Aaron Estes
USA, 2004, Running time: 90mins.

Mean Creek studyguide written by Mark Venner
Devised and edited by Alicia McGivern
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Arts Council Working Group on Film and Young People

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