

Half Nelson



Synopsis

Dan Dunne is a young inner-city junior high school teacher whose ideals wither and die in the face of reality. Rejecting the standard curriculum in favour of an edgier approach, Dan teaches his students how change works – on both a historical and personal scale – and how to think for themselves.

Though Dan is brilliant, dynamic, and in control in the classroom, he spends his time outside school on the edge of consciousness. His disappointments and disillusionment have led to a serious drug habit. He juggles his hangovers and his homework, keeping his lives separated, until one of his troubled students, Drey (Shareeka Epps), catches him getting high after school.

From this awkward beginning, Dan and Drey stumble into an unexpected friendship. Despite the differences in their ages and situations, they are both at an important intersection. Depending on which way they turn – and which choices they make – their lives will change.

Introduction

This resource looks at the film Half Nelson as an example of American Independent Cinema. With this in mind we consider the aesthetic of the film. In addition to this we also consider the ‘teacher film’ and look at representations contained here. This is suitable for GCSE, AS, Highers and A2 Students of English, Film and Media Studies.

Independent Filmmaking

Generating the money necessary to make a film requires deep pockets and a great deal of patience. Independent films are often financed by several companies, and involve a large number of companies being involved at all stages of the process. This contrasts with films that are studio produced, as that studio is typically wealthy enough to finance the whole venture. See if you can find out how many companies were involved in Half Nelson.

This financial backdrop can translate into what we see on screen. The 'above the line costs' includes elements such as, actors and locations. In Half Nelson we can see that the film has very few locations, and the actors in the film maybe making their screen debut.

It may be that you've seen this film at a screening organised by your school. Is this a film that you saw while it was out at the cinema? What types of things usually attract you to going to see a film at the cinema? Make a list.

You may have listed the names of your favourite actors, special effects or even a particular genre.

Having watched Half Nelson would you consider watching another film that perhaps had a member of its cast or was directed by Ryan Fleck? Are there any other aspects of the film (think about content as well as the filmmaking) that makes Half Nelson distinctive in some way?

The budget impacts on the actors that you can afford to have in a film as well as other costs such as equipment, like cameras as well as staff operating the equipment. Half Nelson was made for \$1 million. How does it compare to a big budget film that you've seen?

In addition to these visible elements like cast and location the subject matter of independent films is often different to blockbusters. Why do you think this is? You may want to return to the film you chose for the last question and consider the content. Is one more provocative than the other? How would you describe the content of these films?

Genre and Representation

How would you describe the genre of Half Nelson? If someone had said to you before you went in 'It's about a teacher in an inner city (US) school'. What would your expectations have been? What other films at this point do you think it might have been like? Make a list.

From these titles can you see some similarities in the way that they represent certain characters? Is this enough to consider this a genre or sub-genre? How do these genre characteristics work in terms of narrative? Using this basic narrative chart, list the basic types of actions/behaviours etc. that may happen at various stages in broad generic terms. Think about the films you listed above to help you.

Narrative Phase	Possible Action/Behaviours
Equilibrium	
Disruption	
Complication	
Resolution	

Genre requires that films are similar enough to be recognised by an audience, but also different enough to be interesting and fresh. Think about the following elements and consider how they contribute to Half Nelson being either similar or different to a standard generic interpretation.

- Character Type (Daniel Dunne, Drey, etc.)
- Setting
- Character Relationships
- Narration

Representing History

The students in the film are learning about the Civil Rights Movement. Was there anything distinctive about these aspects of the film? What techniques were used to communicate these facts to an audience? Is there one in particular that you remembered? Did you learn anything from these sections?