

## The Fighter Study Notes



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**Directed by:** David O’Russell

**Certificate:** 15

**Running time:** 116 mins

**Release date:** 2 February 2011

### Synopsis:

Micky Ward (Mark Wahlberg) is a boxer from the working class town of Lowell, Massachusetts. He is on the cusp of competing in the biggest fights of his career but is being held back by the conflicts within his family – his interfering mother (Melissa Leo) and his sisters, as well as his crack-addicted brother Dicky (Christian Bale), himself a former boxing champion. Spotting his potential, boxing promoters offer Micky the chance to train and compete professionally in Las Vegas. With his competitive destiny beckoning, Micky is split three ways and must choose between his new girlfriend (Amy Adams), his family and his own dreams.

**The Study Notes are designed for students of Media and Film Studies and related subjects at GCSE, AS/A2 level and equivalent.**

## Before viewing: the calibre of *The Fighter*

*The Fighter* was created by a well-regarded team of filmmakers and actors. It was highly anticipated, positively reviewed and Oscar nominated in seven categories (a winner in two).

- When have director David O’Russell and producer-star Mark Wahlberg worked together before?
- Mark Wahlberg trained every day for four years for the role of Micky Ward before he was even certain he had the part! Find out about Mark Wahlberg’s upbringing, filmography and troubled adolescence. Do you think this actor is suited to the role?
- What is famous about Christian Bale’s physical approach to preparing for a role? Find examples from his previous films.
- How are O’Russell and actress Melissa Leo connected to the world of independent filmmaking?

## After viewing: the representation of real- life people and places in film

*The Fighter* was filmed in the town of Lowell, Massachusetts, USA where all the events depicted in the film really took place. Not only that, but also the real-life characters and their huge extended family were present on set every day. Mark Wahlberg had a pre-existing relationship with Micky Ward and his family and some characters are actually played by the real-life counter-parts.

- In what ways might you expect this decision to shoot in the town of Lowell to add to the authenticity of the film?
- Did seeing real-life footage of the brothers, with title cards introducing them, add to or detract from the impact of the film?
- Did you feel the film judges or exonerates any of the characters?

### The influence of television and sport

*The Fighter* acknowledges the impact that sports coverage can have in a film. The fight scenes involving Micky were shot by an HBO television crew and used graphics and titles, giving the sequences a high-definition sheen and the feel of a live pay-per-view broadcast. The fights were shot ‘live’ from beginning to end like a real boxing match, which meant the contests were shot in a very short amount of time and the punches were often real.

- How do the fight scenes stand alongside the look of the rest of the film?
- Do the scenes create a sense of verisimilitude (realism)?
- Find footage of other boxing movie fights. How is film language used to create impact and excitement (according to legend, the cameraman was on roller-skates during the fight scenes in *Raging Bull*)?

## Depiction of drug abuse

The documentary being made about Dicky's addiction to crack is in fact a real award-winning film that was broadcast on HBO called *High on Crack Street: Lost Lives in Lowell*. Find out what you can about this film online – look for reviews, footage and images from the documentary.

- How convincing did you find the portrayal of Dicky's addiction in the film?
- How effectively did you feel the consequences of drug addiction were addressed in *The Fighter*?

## *The Fighter*: just another *Rocky*?

*The Fighter* has the typical conventions of a sports biopic. *Rocky* is considered an archetypal sports/boxing movie and was acknowledged as a key inspiration by the filmmakers. Look at the suggested conventions of sports biopics listed here, then answer the questions below:

- the protagonist comes from a socially, financially or physically disadvantaged background
- the protagonist is considered an underdog
- at some point the protagonist has to choose between a relationship/commitment and their sport/destiny. They might lose everything!
- before the final fight/contest, the protagonist loses their nerve and has to be convinced to compete
- after the final match, the protagonist wins a moral victory whether or not he/she actually wins the contest

## Questions:

- How closely does *The Fighter* follow these conventions?
- Is *The Fighter*'s narrative predictable?
- Compared to other boxing movies, what Unique Selling Points does *The Fighter* have that make it stand apart?

**Activity:**

Look at some other boxing (and one wrestling!) films or their plot synopses. How do they conform to or diverge from the narrative conventions of sports biopics?

<i>The Champ</i> (1979)	<i>Raging Bull</i> (1980)
<i>The Hurricane</i> (1999)	<i>Cinderella Man</i> (2005)
<i>When We Were Kings</i> (1996)	<i>The Boxer</i> (1997)
<i>Million Dollar Baby</i> (2004)	<i>Ali</i> (2001)
<i>Girlfight</i> (2000)	<i>The Wrestler</i> (2008)
<i>Against the Ropes</i> (2004)	<i>Rocky Balboa</i> (2006)

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