Edward Scissorhands
Teacher Resource
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EDWARD SCISSORHANDS (TIM BURTON, 1990)

Edward Scissorhands tells the story of Edward, a boy found living alone in a dark mansion on the top of a mountain. Edward is the creation of an elderly inventor who dies before he can replace Edward’s scissorhands with conventional hands. The motherly Peg takes Edward under her wing and invites him into her home to live as part of her family. The world into which Edward is placed is a model of pastel-coloured conformity. Initially, he is welcomed by the rest of the community as an entertaining oddity but is brutally rejected when things go wrong.

EXPLORING EDWARD SCISSORHANDS.

This resource provides discussion questions and activities for exploring Edward Scissorhands with your students. ACMI’s Film Analysis in the Classroom resource offers complementary material to support the study of film as text with your students: http://www.acmi.net.au/ed-film-analysis-in-classroom.htm


SOME BACKGROUND

The inspiration for Edward Scissorhands goes back to Tim Burton’s childhood in suburban Burbank. When he was growing up he found the tendency for the people around him to live life on the surface unsettling and alienating. Because everyone was so concerned how things looked on the surface, it was very difficult for anyone to be different.

Burton’s struggle to deal with this world of conformity was the inspiration for Edward Scissorhands. He says of this character, The idea actually came from a drawing I did a long time ago. It was just an image that I liked. It came subconsciously and was linked to a character who wants to touch but can’t, who was both creative and destructive. ... It was the feeling that your image and how people perceive you are at odds with what is inside you.

• As a class, discuss this idea that other people often don’t know what is going on inside you, and cannot see the person you feel you really are.
  o What is the effect of this?
  o Why does it matter?
  o Is it always a good idea to let others know what you are thinking and how you are feeling? Explain.
• What are some of the things we can do to communicate effectively with others?
• How important is it that we make the effort to really ‘see’ who other people are?

Edward Scissorhands is Tim Burton’s most autobiographical film but most of his films feature characters who are outsiders. Burton uses filmmaking as a means of communicating all the feelings that used to be hidden inside him.
• Ask students to focus on one important thing that they would like to communicate about themselves or the world around them. They can then choose the art or media form of their choice to represent this idea, belief or quality.

THEMES

Difference and conformity

• Describe the way the townspeople in *Edward Scissorhands* respond to him.
  - Why do they welcome him at first and then turn against him?
  - What does this tell us about them and the community they live in?

• How does Edward respond to the people in the community?
  - How and why does he struggle to understand his new environment? Explain with examples from the film.

• Ask students to divide into groups and consider Tim Burton’s statement: ‘I just remember that feeling that what people call “normal” is not normal and what people call abnormal isn’t normal.’
  - What does he mean by this?
  - When, how and why might the word ‘normal’ be used to hurt or control others.
  - Focus on a number of the characters in *Edward Scissorhands* to explore the negative consequences of norms and the pressure to conform.

Creativity and Imagination

Edward

Not only is Edward the unique product of his scientist creator’s vision and imagination, he also benefits from the love and care lavished on him by this surrogate father.

• How do we know they have a special relationship?
• Why are Edward’s memories so important?
• How does Edward reflect and express the creativity and vision of his father?

Peg

• In what ways is Peg different from the other people in the town?
• Describe what we learn about her when she is first introduced.
• Why is Peg the only townsperson to actually even notice that Edward’s house is looming over the town?
• How does Peg respond to Edward and what does this tell us about her?

Kim

• Describe Kim’s character. How does she change and why?
• Choose a scene where we see Kim learning more about herself and the world she lives in as a result of meeting Edward. Describe what happens and explain Edward’s role.

Being human
Director Tim Burton has always been fascinated by the idea of what makes someone truly human, and this is one of the central themes of *Edward Scissorhands*.

• In what ways is Edward more human than most of the people he encounters?
• Which characters in *Edward Scissorhands* are the most destructive and monstrous? Explain.
• What are the values that the film advocates?

THE SETTING

• Describe the two worlds depicted in *Edward Scissorhands*.
• How do lighting, colour and shape influence our understanding of each of these worlds? Explain.
• How do the characters’ costumes emphasise the contrast between the two worlds explored in the film?
• Explain how the contrast between these two worlds adds to our understanding of the story and the themes being communicated.
• What does each of these places represent?
• How are these two worlds connected through the characters of Edward and Kim?
• When Tim Burton described the suburb in which he grew up, he said that there was ‘no sense of history, no sense of culture, no sense of passion for anything’. How does this description apply to the town in *Edward Scissorhands*?

GENRE

Films can often be classified into groups or genres based on the recognisable story elements they share (e.g. horror, comedy, romcom). These story elements are known as genre conventions. Often films use elements from a number of different genres.

Horror Film

• Watch the scene where Peg visits Edward’s house.
  o What well-known film genre is this scene drawing on?
  o Focusing on what you see and what you hear, identify all the features of this genre.
  o How does this scene build up our expectations about what is going to happen and then surprises us?

Fairy Tale

In *Edward Scissorhands* the opening and closing scenes provide a frame for the main story. It also gives us important information about the kind of story we are watching.

• Provide a single sentence description of the beginning and end of the film.
  o What do they tell us about the kind of story being told in *Edward Scissorhands*? (‘Well a long time ago...’

FREE FOR EDUCATIONAL USE - Education Resource - Edward Scissorhands
The special effects and make-up artist, Stan Winston, who worked on *Edward Scissorhands* was only able to understand what Burton was trying to achieve when he realised the film was a fairy tale. Up until that point he had been trying to use logic to understand the story.

List the fairy tale elements in *Edward Scissorhands*.

Fairy tales are used to teach.

- What does *Edward Scissorhands* teach us?

Fairy Tales are also about magic and transformation.

- Explain what is magical about *Edward Scissorhands*.
- Describe the way that Edward transforms the world below his house. How is this communicated visually?

Teen Film

- How is *Edward Scissorhands* also a ‘teen film’? Explain, identifying the elements drawn from this genre.

When Tim Burton was criticised that Jim’s death at the end of the film made the film too dark, he suggested it was a ‘revenge fantasy’ in response to the behavior of the ‘jocks’ at his high school.

- What do you think of the portrayal of Jim and the other high school students?
- Do you think that Jim’s death is the most appropriate way of ending the story or would there have been other, possibly better, alternatives?

One of the key conventions (a familiar element) of the teen film is that the main character learns more about who they are and grows as a person.

- Which character in *Edward Scissorhands* goes through this process of gaining self-knowledge?

**Narrative**

- Map the events that take place in the story in the order in which they take place.
  - When and how do we find out about who Edward is and where he has come from?
  - What is the effect of this?
  - Why have Tim Burton and scriptwriter Caroline Thompson decided to tell the story in this way?
  - How does this way of telling Edward’s story reinforce Burton’s message about the limitations of trying to understand an individual through the way s/he presents him/herself to the world.