



BRITISH SCHOOLS FILM FESTIVAL #5

NOWHERE BOY

UK/Canada 2009

98 minutes

Director Sam Taylor-Wood

Cast

John	-	Aaron Johnson
Mimi	-	Kristin Scott Thomas
Uncle George	-	David Threlfall
Julia	-	Anne-Marie Duff
Bobby	-	David Morrissey
Paul	-	Thomas Brodie Sangster
George	-	Sam Bell

Selected Music

Wild One performed by Jerry Lee Lewis

Mr. Sandman performed by Dickie Valentine

Shake, Rattle and Roll performed by Elvis Presley

Rockin' Daddy performed by Eddie Bond and The Stompers

Hard Headed Woman performed by Wanda Jackson

Hound Dog performed by Big Mama Thornton

Hello Little Girl (song by John Lennon and Paul McCartney) performed by The Nowhere Boys

Mother performed by John Lennon

FSK: 12, recommended age: 14+

English with German subtitles

Study Guide by Julian Name, 2010

Themes

society, youth culture, coming of age, parents, music

Questions for the class are organized in two categories: before viewing (bv) and after viewing (av).
A work sheet with planned activities is also attached.

Synopsis

Directed by Sam Taylor-Wood, **Nowhere Boy** is a film about the life and growing up pains of a rather young rebellious dreamer called John Lennon. Set in Liverpool, the film begins in the mid-1950s, when John is a brash 15 year old schoolboy, always getting into trouble. The film ends two years later with him going to Hamburg, accompanied by his newly-formed band, The Beatles (interestingly, not mentioned in the film). Within these two years, John goes through a remarkable change. A change shaped largely by the two most important people in John's life: both, women of extraordinary strength. First there is John's aunt, Mimi (played by Kristin Scott Thomas), who has been taking care of him since he was five years old. Second there is John's actual mother, Julia (Anne-Marie Duff), who abandoned her five year son ten years ago, but now wants him back. This emotional triangle - between John, Mimi and Julia - as well as John's growing love for rock-n-roll music form the core of the film.

Sam Taylor-Wood clearly wants to portray the two women in John's life as very strong characters in her film. They have, however, their own weaknesses, which John is very quick to see. Mimi appears strict and even cold. Exercising enormous self-control (indeed, perhaps too much), she seems unable to express feelings in an overtly physical way. This is one reason why John calls her "Mimi" rather than "mum". In John's eyes, Julia is just the opposite of Mimi. While Mimi is reserved, Julia is exuberant. While Mimi cannot express emotions in a physical way, Julia exhibits very sensuous behaviour. This is expressed most clearly in her love for rock-n-roll music, which both fascinates and inspires John. Unlike Mimi, however, Julia doesn't have her own life very well under control. As a strong-willed teenager with an enormous talent for musical expression, John inevitably brings the two sisters into conflict. As tensions within the trio rise, old wounds are re-opened and re-examined. Yet, "in spite of all the heartache", the three clearly love each other by the end of the film. Although Julia's sudden death in a car accident gives the film a sad touch, John is still able to rely on his mutual love and respect for Mimi, as he goes off to make his future, changing music as we know it forever.

Sam Taylor-Wood's film begins with a tribute to the opening scenes of Richard Lester's 1964 Beatles film, "A Hard Day's Night". In her film we see the young John Lennon running under a colonnade, being chased by the roar of screaming girls. Is this a dream or a premonition? Rudely awoken by Mimi, we see it is a dream. Getting breakfast quickly, he goes off to school as we hear Jerry Lee Lewis singing the song "Wild One". Not only is John a very "cocky" schoolboy, he is also quick-witted, as the school Head Master soon discovers. While lecturing him on his bad behaviour, saying, "You are going nowhere!" John retorts, "There's nowhere for the geniuses sir... because then I do probably belong there." The title of film, **NNowhere Boy**, is now flashed on the screen.

We next hear the classical music of Tchaikovsky as John and Uncle George (played by David Threlfall) are playfully connecting a speaker from the radio, which is located in the sitting room where Mimi is, to John's bedroom upstairs. In the mid-1950s, of course, radio was the main popular source of music. While the two are listening to a radio play, Uncle George collapses. At first giggling, John quickly realizes the seriousness of the situation. Returning from the hospital that same night, Mimi tells John that George is dead. At first giggling again, John now begins to cry, hugging Mimi tightly. Mimi, however, remains extremely reserved, saying, "Please, let's not be silly...If you want to do that, you go to your room... There's just the two of us now so let's just get on with it, shall we?". Clearly, with Uncle George's death, much of the fun in John's life has gone. Standing separate from the others in the funeral, John notices a red-headed woman also wearing black. She smiles slightly but then walks away. John knows this woman is his mother Julia. He wants to meet her, but is not helped by Mimi. Finally, his cousin finds out where she lives and they both go to meet her, not knowing exactly what to expect.

When Julia opens the door and sees John standing there, she is overwhelmed with both joy and pain. Walking slowly to John, she embraces him warmly. John does the same. Now in the dining room, the three of them as well as Julia's two younger daughters all have some cake together at the table. Seeing John's harmonica, she asks him, if she could try it. "Your spit, my spit anyway" she says smilingly. This physicality is quite new for John. We now begin to hear the song "Mr. Sandman" sung by Dickie Valentine as John and Julia go to Blackpool, because as she says, it's "Fun! Fun! Fun"! As they walk along Blackpool pier, we hear the lyrics, "Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream". But whose dream is it? John and Julia act more like a pair of lovers than as a mother accompanied by her son. Hearing some rock-n-roll music blaring out of a juke-box in a teashop, they both go in. After asking some guys for a light, Julia starts dancing and singing to the music. Feeling a little bit uncomfortable, Julia looks straight into

John's eyes and asks him teasingly, "Do you know what it means...rock-n-roll?" Coming close to him, she says, "Sex." Returning to Julia's home, she and John now dance rock-n-roll together until late in the evening. Hugging John as leaves, Julia whispers in his hear, "Don't tell Mimi. Please! This is our secret. Promise me." John nods. "I love you", she shouts, as John turns around smilingly. As their eyes meet, she jubilantly adds, "You're my dream! Don't forget that!" John obviously wants to see more of his mother although her friend Bobby (David Morrissey) doesn't really like it.

After leaving Mimi's strict house in the morning and going through another boring day at school, John goes off to see Julia again. Together, they go to the cinema. There John discovers how all the young girls in the audience - as well as his mother - become ecstatic as they watch a newsreel about "the King of Rock-n-Roll", Elvis Presley. We now begin to hear Elvis Presley singing "Shake, Rattle and Roll", as John begins to wear his hair and clothes like a rocker. We then see John at a record shop with his friend, stealing some singles. Not interested in the Jazz titles, John exchanges his stolen records for a single by Screaming Jay Hawkins with the song "I Put a Spell on You". It seems Julia has indeed put a spell on John. As the two lie down together on the sofa, listening to the song, John remembers the sexual fun he just had with a schoolgirl in the park. Here, Taylor-Wood uses parallel editing to great effect, emphasizing the highly sensual quality John has to his mother, to Rock-n-Roll, and, of course, to the girl in the park.

With such enticements, John's always poor performance at school worsens, culminating in his suspension. His interests clearly lie elsewhere. "Why couldn't God make me Elvis", he asks Julia in a teashop. "Because he was saving you for John Lennon", she answers passionately. He then tells her that has been suspended from school and that he hasn't told Mimi. Shocked, John pleadingly asks her, "Can I stay with you...just during the day? Be a mate." Julia concedes, but on the condition that John learns to play the banjo. This secret arrangement, however, is soon discovered. While John is playing the Buddy Holly song, "That'll be the Day" on the banjo with Julia in her living room, Mimi storms in saying, "No Julia, this may be your life... one big common mess. But it is not his!" Pointing to the door, Mimi turns to John, commanding him to leave Julia's house. But John remains seated. Looking at Julia and then at Mimi, he shakes his head. Stunned, Julia tells Mimi, "Get out of my house...Go Mimi!" Pushing her out the door, Julia now hugs and kisses John, who is himself shocked, angry and confused. It is like the lyrics in Buddy Holly's song - "That'll be the day, when you say good-bye". Mimi, of course, is very hurt. But can he stay with Julia, Bobby and the two girls? Realizing it is not an option, John returns home to Mimi, who asks him directly, "Have you decided where you are living nowadays?" Looking at John more tenderly, she says, "She will hurt you, you know that, don't you?" Without answering her, but looking resolute, John softly says "I'm going to start a rock-n-roll group... be like Elvis."

Although Mimi clearly favours classical music over rock-n-roll, she supports John in his music, even buying him his first guitar. Already acting like a "Rockin' Daddy" (song performed by Eddie Bond and The Stompers), John quickly organizes a skiffel band, called The Quarrymen. As the group performs more gigs, they begin to attract more attention. Eventually John meets a very talented 15 year old boy called Paul McCartney, who, in turn, introduces him to the young guitarist George Harrison. Having largely given up on school, John now focuses all his energy on integrating all this musical talent into his band, giving it a unique sound. The band's success, however, cannot cover up the hurt John still feels towards his mother. When Julia organizes a birthday party for John at her home, all the emotional dams burst. When the two are alone outside the house, John accusingly asks her, "Where's dad?" "He abandoned us", Julia eventually answers. "And then you abandoned me", John retorts. "I wanted you back. I always wanted you back...She never gave you back", answers Julia, crying. "But surely I'm not Mimi's to give...You're my mum", says John, slowing walking away in pain and disgust. When John comes home to Mimi, he sees her waiting for him with a birthday cake and an expensive electric guitar as a present. But there is no time for celebration as Julia comes to Mimi's house. The three now have a huge fight. John begins by telling Mimi what Julia told him. "She said you stole me...What do reckon Mimi", John asks. "Did you", he asks again. Furious, Mimi tells John about how Julia had another man's daughter, which was taken away by the Salvation Army. "Your mother has always needed company", Mimi continues, "Do you know what I mean by company?" Moreover, while Julia was "shacked up" with another "fancy man" called Bobby, "your father turned up out of the blue" and kidnapped you. With your parents unable to decide what to do with you Mimi continues, "in all their great wisdom, they decided to ask you...a five year old boy, who you wanted to spend the rest of your life with...And you said...daddy". And only when Julia left you, and your father was going to take you to New Zealand, only at that moment Mimi adds, "That is when I stole you...and if that is stealing, I'm a thief." Hearing all this, John is, of course, devastated. Indeed, all three of them are now very hurt. Have their relationships now come to an end?

Now having to grow up and truly face the frailties of human life, John tells Mimi while she is attending Uncle George's grave, "I'm not going to hold it against her...what she did in Blackpool." Surprised, Mimi answers, "Well, forgive and forget I suppose." "Forget? I wish!" John retorts. "There's just no point hating someone you love...I mean you really love...Is there Mimi?" he continues. The two look into each other's eyes for second. Glancing at the trees, John says, "I should move out". Mimi is surprised as John continues, "...and who knows, with me gone, maybe you and mum might remember you were sisters once." This is a very touching moment in the film, for in a sense all three of them have to face up to their own weaknesses and re-appraise their love for each other. With John's words in mind, Mimi arranges a meeting with Julia in a teashop. There Mimi admits to having made mistakes, but "I do love you. I hope you know that" she tells her. Clearly moved, Julia looks down but nods her head. Indeed, for the first time in the film, John, Julia and Mimi all appear happy together. We hear John express his happiness in the song "Hello Little Girl" (The first Lennon/McCartney song in the film). This happiness, however, is cut short by the sudden death of Julia in a car accident. After Julia's wake we hear John's band recording the song "In spite of all the Heartache" in a sound studio. The band is clearly getting more and more professional. One day, John announces to Mimi he is going to Hamburg. "Is this with the new group, what are they called", she asks. "Do you really care", asks John. Smiling, she says, "They are sound the same to me." The irony of course is that the group is called "The Beatles". Since John is still only 17 years old, he needs Mimi to sign his passport application form. "Can you sign this please", asks John. "Where do I sign", asks Mimi. "Where it says parents or guardian", he answers. "But which am I", asks Mimi. Looking at her, he says quietly, "Both". Realizing the significance of this answer, Mimi and John embrace. It is a very tender moment. Kissing her on the cheek as he leaves her, we hear the real John Lennon singing his very moving song, "Mother".

Questions

bv: What kind of music do you like? Give examples.

Who plays an instrument? Who plays in a band? Is it fun or difficult? Or is it both?

What kind of music was popular in the 1950s? Who knows Elvis Presley? What music became popular in the 1960s? Which bands were popular then?

There were, of course, no iPods, PCs or MTV in the 1950s. So how did people listen to music in the 1950s?

Where did young people go for fun in the 1950s?

av: What role does the music play in Sam Taylor-Wood's film Nowhere Boy?

Julia is often dressed in very red clothes (i.e. her coat, her blouse etc.). On the other hand, Mimi is normally dressed in very dark colours. Why is that? What do the colours express about their personalities?

Why is John so mean to his mother on his 17th birthday party?

Coming-of-age of a Celebrity:

Sam Taylor-Wood's film **Nowhere Boy** has a number of interesting features. Firstly, the work combines the well-known themes of a coming-of-age film with that of a love-triangle film. The coming-of-age element is, of course, John's journey into manhood. That is, his transition from an immature 15 year old schoolboy to a grown-up 17 year old musician, who is about to change the world of rock-n-roll. Taylor-Wood goes to great lengths to show that this growing up process is not specific to John Lennon, but is rather something all young people must go through. The love-triangle element centres on the changing relationships between the three key characters in the film: John, Julia and Mimi. This love-triangle structure (often called a romantic-triangle) is usually a permutation of the following elements: two boys and a girl or two girls and a boy. Either one of the boys falls in love with the girl or one of the girls falls in love with the boy. As can be seen, this film structure is quite simple. Taylor-Wood, however, uses a quite unusual mix. Here, the triangle is between a younger man, John, and two older sisters, Mimi and Julia,

who is also John's mother. This love-triangle allows quite new and unexpected emotional avenues to now be explored in the film. Thus, for example, we have John's relationship with his mother, Julia, which is also quite sensual. This is an indirect comment on John's relationship with Mimi. As John becomes closer to his mother, tensions between the two sisters increase, eventually exploding. With all three now being forced to re-assess their relationships, Mimi and Julia rekindle their mutual affection, while John becomes more content and emotionally secure. In short, new relationships are established between all three characters. Taylor-Wood is extremely adept at exploring all these new emotional avenues, thereby making the film quite unusual.

Secondly, Taylor-Wood's film **Nowhere Boy** has to confront a very special problem. While Taylor-Wood tries to present the main character in the film, John, as a normal rebellious teenager with a talent for rock-n-roll music, audiences - especially older viewers - obviously associate this boy with the world famous John Lennon, leading member of the legendary rock band, The Beatles. That is, audiences already know beforehand, what John's future is. This makes it difficult for Taylor-Wood to create some sense of dramatic tension concerning John's struggle to become a musician. We already know the outcome. For many younger people, however, this is not the case. While some young people may have heard of The Beatles, fewer have ever heard of the name John Lennon.

Moreover, Taylor-Wood deals with this special problem in two different ways. For those who have some knowledge of John Lennon and The Beatles, there are constant references made to this famous group. Examples include the opening scenes of the film, which directly refer to the opening sequence of Richard Lester's 1964 Beatles film, "A Hard Day's Night"; the ironic moment when John, stumbling down the street after the huge fight with Mimi and Julia, is refused entry to the club called The Cavern, where The Beatles will later do some of their legendary gigs; or the planned trip to Hamburg, where The Beatles finally become famous. For those with no knowledge of John Lennon and The Beatles, Taylor-Wood herself makes no overt reference to The Beatles. Instead she emphasizes the normality of John's life. How he struggles to find out who he really is - and how he follows his dream.

Questions

bv: Which teenager films do you know?

Which romantic films do you know? In order to fall in love, you need of course two people. Many romantic films, however, have three main characters. Why is it more interesting to have a romantic story with three main characters, rather than only with two?

av: What makes Nowhere Boy different from other teenager films you know?

Who do you think is more important in John's life - Mimi or Julia? Explain.

Analysis of a Film Sequence

Generally speaking, the camera work in **Nowhere Boy** closely follows the narration of the film. That is, for Taylor-Wood, it is primarily the storyline which determines the importance of each scene as well as their subsequent sequencing. There are a few moments in the film, however, where the film editing is especially important. A good example of this is the scene where John goes to Julia so that the two of them can both listen to the single "I Put a Spell on You". This scene is very important because it brings out the sensual side of John's and Julia's relationship to each other, the underlying sensuousness of rock-n-roll music, and the overtly sexual side of John. Yet, how to combine these three strands into one film sequence? This can be quite problematic. Taylor-Wood decides to use a very strict parallel montage or parallel editing between John and Julia, on the one hand, and John and the girl on the other hand. The scene begins with Julia laying the needle on the single. We begin to hear the music as Julia - in red - goes up and down to the beat of the music. She slowly stands up, lights a cigarette as we see John sitting on the sofa. We see a low camera shot of Julia walking slowly towards John. The low shot implies we are seeing Julia from John's perspective. The music is incredibly sexy. To relax, John lies down on the sofa. To his surprise, Julia also lies down practically on top of him. Listening to the music, she looks like she is in (sexual?) ecstasy. As the two get close, so does the camera, which does a half-shot (a shot from the waist upwards). This, of course, further raises the emotional intensity of the scene. Now we see a detail shot (a shot where the camera films one single object in full detail) of John's hand. The camera pans (that is, it moves) onto Julia's deep red blouse, showing her red-painted fingernails. The music continues as

we now see a detail shot of the girl's red-painted fingernails as she groans with pleasure. There is then a full shot (a shot showing the characters from head to foot with large background) of John and the girl by a tree in the park, having sexual fun. Taylor-Wood uses the full shot here to show audiences exactly where they are in the film. This is followed by a close-up of John and the girl, as she reaches orgasm. Still with a close-up, we now see the girl turn towards John. The two kiss. A full-shot shows John pulling down his trousers as the girl goes down on her knees. The music continues. A close-up of John smiling is suddenly cut to a frontal close-up of John in pain, as we now only hear the sound of him being whipped by the Head Master. Here we see how carefully constructed the whole sequence is.

Questions

bv: What camera shots do we know?

When are close-up shots most often used in a film? Why?

What are the different ways of showing two separate stories together (i.e. split-screen, parallel editing)? What could be their advantages and disadvantages?

av: Is the camera work fast or slow? What role does the music play in "speeding up" certain scenes (i.e. John riding on top of the bus)?

When John is learning to play the banjo in Julia's house, how is the long period of time visually expressed?

Which is the sexiest moment in the film? How is it filmed? Why is it filmed in this way?

Language

Although Liverpool has a distinctive local accent, Taylor-Wood made sure that all the characters in the film have relatively clear and easily understandable accents. Since the film is set in the 1950s, there are certain phrases and cultural norms which have, of course, gone out of style. Here are a few:

Cock: Slang for penis. The term is still used today.

Dick(head): Slang for penis, meaning a complete idiot. Still used today.

(Milk) jugs: Old fashioned slang for breasts.

Juke-box: A very popular machine until the 1960s often found in pubs that automatically plays a selected record when a coin is inserted.

Lodger: A person living in another's house and paying for this accommodation.

Mods: An outdated term for young people who tend to like Country and Rockabilly music. They hate Rockers.

Newsreel: A cinema film showing current items of news.

Nick: British slang, meaning to steal or to be arrested by the police. This word is still commonly used in this sense today.

Rockers: An outdated term for young people who dress and act like Elvis Presley and love rock-n-roll. They hate Mods.

A Single (also known as 45s): A pop record with one piece of music on each side. These records were used in the juke-boxes.

Skiffel Music: A type of popular music made with homemade or improvised instruments like the washboard, tea chest bass as well as conventional instruments such as acoustic guitar and banjo. Although originating in the early United States, there was a revival of skiffel music in the UK in the 1950s. A notable skiffel group was John Lennon's "The Quarrymen".

Wanker: British slang for a boy who masturbates. The word usually means a weakling or an idiot. Still used today.

WAS IST BRITFILMS?

BRITFILMS ist eine Schulfilmreihe der AG Kino-Gilde, Verband der Programmkinos und Filmkunsttheater in Deutschland. Sechs englischsprachige Filme touren 16 Monate lang durch die deutschen Kinos und werden von den Kinobetreibern in Schulvorführungen für Kinder im Alter von 8-18 Jahren eingesetzt. Die Vorführungen können direkt in den teilnehmenden Kinos gebucht werden.

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BRITISH SCHOOLS FILM FESTIVAL #5

WORK SHEET FOR THE FILM **NOWHERE BOY** BY **SAM TAYLOR-WOOD**

1. In class generally discuss the film, letting people freely make comparisons with other films they know. These could be other teenager films, romantic films or music films. In particular, draw out the differences and similarities between other teenager films and **Nowhere Boy**, writing the information on the board. What do these differences and similarities tell us about the film **Nowhere Boy**?
2. Working now in groups, please identify and describe in your own words all the main characters in the film. These of course are John, Mimi and Julia. All three of the characters have their own strengths and weaknesses. What are they? Which character/s is the most dynamic in pushing the story forward? Which character/s is the most passive, trying to keep the status quo? After writing everything down, discuss all points in class. What do the characters have in common? What makes them different?
3. Work as a small group. Fold a page from top to bottom. On the left, choose two scenes you find the most dramatic and important in the film. On the right, write down a list of words to describe these scenes and your emotional reaction to them. Discuss in class, writing the various scenes down on the board along with their descriptions. Number the various scenes on the board following the chronology of the film. What does this sequence of scenes tell us about the dramatic structure of the film?
4. Work in small groups. a.) On the left of the page, identify the scene where John definitely decides to form his own band. On the right side, write down the reasons why you think this scene happens at this particular time in the film.
b.) Please identify on the left side of the page the scene where John realizes that continuing to hate people you truly love is wrong. On the right side, answer the following questions: Why does he say that? Who does he really have in mind, when saying this?
Both scenes are important turning points in the film. What do these two turning points have in common? What makes them different? After writing everything down, discuss all points in class.
5. Work as a small group. In the film we see both Rockers and Mods. They dress differently, listen to different music and have different friends. On the left side of the page make a list of words describing their motives for being in different groups. Today we have new different youth groups or scenes. On the right side identify such groups, writing down what makes them different. What makes them the same? After writing everything down, discuss all points in class.
6. In class generally discuss, if such a character like John Lennon with his love for music could exist today? What similarities and differences do you see with current famous rock stars, pop bands etc.? What does it mean to be a (rock) star today? Does it mean the same as "Deutschland sucht den Superstar"?
7. Give pupils time to do research (i.e. via internet) on the life of John Lennon and The Beatles. Perhaps certain songs can be played and discussed in class. The lyrics to Lennon's song "Mother" can easily be downloaded and discussed in class. A DVD of the Beatles can also be shown as a clip.