An Education

(Scherfig, UK, 2009)

Component 2: Global Film; Narrative, Representation & Film Style
Focus Area: Narrative

PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

Sequence 1 - Jenny and her father discuss her university application (2.10-3.06)
https://goo.gl/VA37ra

Sequence 2 - Jenny and Helen discuss shopping
https://goo.gl/07qrY3

Sequence 3 - Jenny meets with Headmistress, Miss Walters – 'Studying is hard & boring' (1.00.57-1.02.46)
https://goo.gl/zpKI38

Sequence 4 - Ending (1.14.47-1.19.42)

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

- Sequence 1 is the first time the audience focuses on Jenny Mellor (Carey Mulligan) outside of school/uniform. It is a static mid shot (MS) that frames Jenny at the centre with her parents either side, literally hemming her in.
- Despite being sat together at the dining table, reaction shots of Jack Mellor (Alfred Molina) – Jenny's father – are shot from a slight low angle (LA) whilst the over-the-shoulder shots (OSS) of Jenny from the slightly higher perspective of her father, reinforce the fact that she is 'weaker' and is his subordinate. This is an interesting juxtaposition to the dialogue, which reveals she is his intellectual superior as she debates technicalities with him.
- In sequence 2, the tracking two-shot of Jenny with Helen (Rosamund Pike) frames the two very different characters almost side-by-side, but with Jenny slightly behind. This shot highlights the difference between the two women at this point in the text, in addition to the dialogue. The lighting is bright and highlights the contrast between dull suburban Twickenham/ school and the city/culture.

Mise-en-Scène

- The mise-en-scène is distinctly brown/beige and grey at the start of the school, both in the shots of school and in sequence 1. This motif is carried through the dress codes, such as the jumper Jenny's father is wearing, as well as the décor of the home – even the family's drinks are brown. Jenny is positioned centrally, framed by the lines of the internal doors/ glazing and windows. She is central to their home but also hemmed in by the setting.
- In sequence one Jenny's mother (Cara Seymour) does not speak, although the camera looks to her reaction to the discussion between Jenny and her father. She is framed by the kitchen in the background, highlighting the main domain/role of women at the time.
- The dark and dull clothing/life is in stark contrast to the life David Goldman (Peter Sarsgaard) introduces Jenny to in London. This is clearly seen in sequence 2, where Jenny's brown duffle coat is in contrast to Helen's white fur stole, coat and gloves. Her glamorous jewels, make-up and hair serve to illustrate what Jenny lacks. She 'strips' at the coat desk to reveal a red strapped dress; her dialogue at the time revealing that Danny pays for her Chelsea shopping trips.
- In sequence 3, Jenny is in the Headmistress' office (Miss Walters played by Emma Thompson). The dark oak panelling of the room reinforcing the 'Establishment' and creating a claustrophobic feel. Jenny is stood with her back pressed up against the wall, with a shelf of silver trophies at shoulder height behind her. The combination of her position in the frame, her guarded gesture codes and school uniform adds to the sense of a narrative turning point. We revisit this office again, in the final

5 minutes of the film where Jenny is sitting, literally cornered in the room. Miss Walters refuses her re-entry to the school and the sense of the power dynamic is interesting when compared to the earlier scenes in sequence 2.

Editing

- In sequence 1, match cuts are used to focus in on the dynamic between father and daughter. The pace is slow, reinforcing the pace of life in suburbia.
- The montage sequence in the final few minutes of the film provide jump cuts to cover the year that Jenny needs to complete her studies and go to university.

Sound

- The opening credits use the 1961 instrumental hit 'On the Rebound' by Elvis Presley's pianist, Floyd Cramer. It is frenetic and uplifting, in stark contrast to the grey, wet and miserable shots of the girls' education that Jenny is receiving.
- The Oscar-winning screenplay is by Nick Hornby and based upon an autobiographical essay by Lynn Barber (it was only published as a memoir after the film was released). A version of the screen play can be found here: https://goo.gl/Gtk1go

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social:

- Set in 1961, this portrays a post-war austerity Britain far from the excitement of sexual and cultural revolutions that occurred later in the decade.
- Even educated women in 1950s/60s Britain were generally limited in employment options (as inadvertently outlined by Miss Walters in sequence 3).
- French culture was exceedingly popular at the time (Lynn Barber blames part of her compliance in the affair on the philosopher Camus and her desperation to be 'sophisticated and French') so the trip to Paris represents how David can literally transport Jenny away from the boredom and repetition of life in post-war London.
- The film explores, to some extent, the anti-Semitic feelings in Britain at the time (direct reference to this can be seen in sequence 3).

Historical:

- The film, written by Nick Hornby, is based on an autobiographical essay by journalist Lynn Barber, first published in Granta magazine https://goo.gl/gIIch9
- The film's production notes have some good comments from Lynn Barber about her experience and how it related to the screen adaptation: https://goo.gl/jh1Zs1
- In these notes, Hornby explains he was drawn to the project because of his social background (suburbia setting with parents who did not attend university) and felt that the universal theme was ' life vs. education'.
- The film has a distinct sense of ennui and does not indulge in nostalgia for the Britain of the 1960s, instead critiquing the adults around Jenny. This is in contrast to American films both from the era (and set within the era) that deal with the post-war boom experienced in America (rock and roll)

PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - Narrative

- The film deals with navigating the adult world and the limited options afforded to her in Britain in 1961.
- It is a linear, chronological narrative (with a montage ending, complete with 'flash-forward' and closing voiceover from Jenny) that is character driven.
- It is looking at the gender politics at the time and, although the key male influences are Jenny's father and, of course, David it is the adult women who have the key influence in driving the narrative forward (and in restoring the equilibrium). Her mother is silent and/or complicit in her father's ambition to marry his daughter 'off' to a rich man; Miss Walters fails to convince Jenny that academic education is worthwhile (referring to it as 'hard and boring') and who later rejects her plea to return (although she does enigmatically reassure Jenny she is 'not ruined'); Miss Stubbs (Olivia Williams) who tries to educate and 'emancipate' Jenny (and who helps her in the final scenes); Helen, who encourages the submissive relationship with David (as seen in sequence 2); even Sarah Goldman (played by Sally Hawkins) who treats her with sympathy and a sense of mild irritation.
- An excellent 7 page introduction to the screenplay, written by Nick Hornby, about taking an idea all the way from the initial inception, through the process of production. He also talks about how the ending changed

during filming: https://goo.gl/8dmtos

- There is a BBC Films microsite which has a copy of the screenplay, clips, production shots (good for still image analysis) and interviews with the cast and director, Lone Scherfig (*Italian for Beginners*): https://goo.gl/bo6GFs