



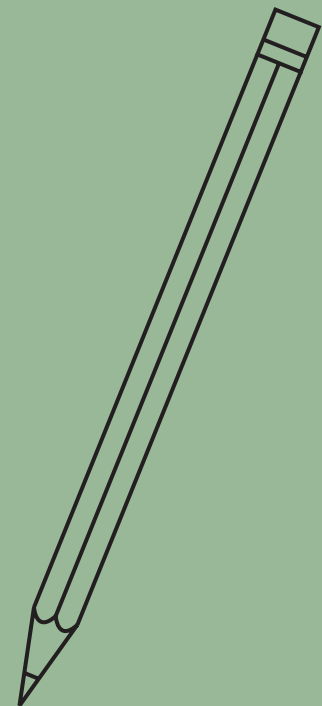
King Coal

STUDY GUIDE

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All SFFILM Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFILM Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials..



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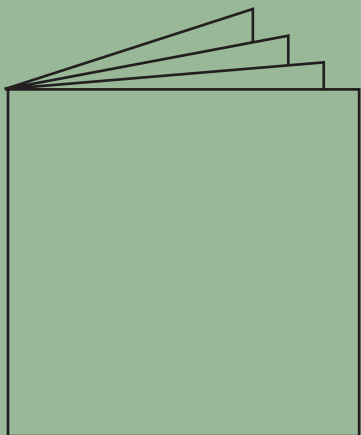
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About the Film

To outsiders, coal is a pollutant, and a major contributor to climate change. But inside the Appalachian region where miners have descended into the depths of mountains for generations, the mineral is something else: sustenance and a way of life on the brink of extinction. The daughter of a miner, documentarian Elaine McMillion Sheldon blends *vérité* and dreamy narration to weave a lyrical story in which coal has played an outsized role in the lives of these communities. Scenes of pageants and fairs devoted to coal, a miners' memorial, two young girls learning about the industry that supports their families, forested mountains, coal barges floating downriver, and archival footage of coal's boom years blend together to form a portrait of a fading culture but one that may find new life in the natural world that surrounds it.

Recommended Grades: 6–12

DIRECTOR

Elaine McMillion Sheldon

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

Katherine Drexler, Heather Baldry

PRODUCERS

Diane Becker, Shane Boris, Peggy Drexler, Elaine McMillion Sheldon

(USA 2022) English, 78 mins

Teaching the Film

Elaine McMillion Sheldon's film is a feature documentary that explores the natural environment and social complexity of the Central Appalachia region. The movie observes the influence of the coal mining industry on the communities' history and local identity.

The filmmaker is a West Virginia native, with family connections to the coal industry, like many Appalachians. With a personal perspective, McMillion Sheldon narrates in voice-over her own journey and reflection about the historical past, the need for grief, and the future to build without the coal's influence in the region. Through dreamlike elements, storytelling is shown as one of the multiple ways to create a new story about the land's history.

A screening of this film may complement a curriculum in history or social studies, specifically examining American history and the environmental movement. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will encourage students to think about national history through the lens of the present cities and communities, exploring the relevance of the past in the current issues of the country, the landmarks and passing of the times, and local identities rooted on historic events.

Subject Areas

- **Activism**
- **Arts/Media**
- **English Language Arts**
- **Government**
- **History**
- **Journalism**
- **Music**
- **Political Science**
- **Social Studies**
- **Women/Gender Studies**



Pre-Viewing Topics

Shot in Southwestern Pennsylvania, Eastern Kentucky, Southwest Virginia, Western North Carolina, East Tennessee, and West Virginia, this film will open the conversation and discussion about the relevance of local history and its influence on the students' identities. As the filmmaker, the main characters in the film, as well as other people interviewed in the movie, students can recognize how each region has changed through times, but also create a legacy that remains today. Family history is another element that is linked with local history, as many relatives could have had a profession passed through generations or a reason to immigrate from a region or country to a new place.

To prepare a class for a screening of **King Coal**, first invite students to consider their own experiences living in their communities and then ask: Which are historical places or landmarks that you recognize in your community? When did those historical moments happen? Why are those places relevant to national or local history?

Once students realize the history that surrounds them, ask them to identify how those historical facts are connected to the present and in which way, at a community or personal level. Where your roots are from and how you and your family are connected to that past? Did members of your family do a particular profession related to the place where they were from? How has that been related to your family identity? Has that family identity changed? If your family immigrated in the past to another country or state, what historic events are behind that change?

The film explores the exploitation of natural resources, the impact on the natural environment, as well as the need to rethink how we interact with the environment. What are your community's regional natural resources? Are those natural resources related to an industry to extract or process them? What is the current impact on the environment of their exploitation over time? Are there plans to change how we use those resources now and in the future?

As a pre-viewing activity, ask your students to work in groups to brainstorm and map historical events, their connection with local identities, and the use of natural resources related to those historical events.



Presenter Bio



Elaine McMillion Sheldon

Elaine McMillion Sheldon is an Academy Award-nominated and Emmy and Peabody-winning filmmaker. Sheldon is the director of two Netflix Original Documentaries, *Heroin(e)* and *Recovery Boys*, that explore America's opioid crisis. She has been named a Creative Capital Awardee, Guggenheim Fellow, a USA Fellow by United States Artists, and one of the "25 New Faces of Independent Film," by Filmmaker Magazine.



Discussion Questions

Characters and Story

Elaine McMillion Sheldon, the film's director, narrates the story. She reflects on her experience growing up in this region, as well as her family history, and the future of those communities.

- What is the filmmaker's point of view?
- What do you think are feelings that the filmmaker has about the past, the present, and the future of the Appalachia region?
- What is her goal in telling this personal story?
- Why is coal named a "king"?
- How does the director imagine the end for the coal industry? Why do you think she imagined it in that way?
- After the changes in the coal industry, why are grief and healing needed?

During the film, we learn about the story of two young girls. They are friends and classmates, sharing roots with the Appalachia region and the coal industry.

- How do they learn about local history?
- What is the influence of the coal industry and "coal culture" in the community where the girls live? At which moments do they interact with this influence?
- What are ways that they use to express themselves? Why do they choose those expressions?
- How are their experiences different? What is the role of race in their experiences?

Style and Messages

- What is your opinion about the film?
- What was the most interesting part of the movie? Which scene was your favorite?
- What were the feelings you had watching the movie?

- How do you relate to some of the stories portrayed in the film?
- What do you think is the director's main message to the audience?

The film used at least three layers of storytelling. First, we learn about the filmmaker's experience through narration with reflections. Second, we follow the day-to-day life in the community and the two girls' experiences living in this region influenced by the coal industry. Third, we watch some dreamlike and poetic elements.

- How does the filmmaker's experience and reflection about the past combine with the present? When does she talk during the film?
- Did you recognize "real life" moments, dreamlike elements, and capture of nature and the land? How did you recognize them and how do you distinguish them? Is there some other storytelling strategy that you learned by watching the movie?
- Why does the film have dreamlike moments? What do you think is the meaning of those elements?
- What are some moments that you find interesting or unique? How do you think those scenes were made?
- What are the differences and similarities you can find between this and other documentaries you have watched before? Have you ever watched a documentary like this? Do you relate this movie to something you watched before?



Discussion Questions (Cont.)

Themes and Context

1. Think about the past, present, and future of the coal industry in the Appalachia region.
 - How was the coal industry in the Central Appalachia region in the past? How is that now?
 - Coal is a precious mineral used to create steel and other products. What have been the economic benefits of this industry in the communities? Who has benefited directly and indirectly? Who do you think created wealth through coal mining?
 - How has the community navigated the risks of working in mining?
 - Mining was a common profession in this region. What do you think in regards to labor is impacted by the changes in this industry?
 - What are industrial opportunities that are not based on coal mining for this region in the future? How can those communities transition to have a local economy that is not based on coal extraction?
2. The film shows the natural landscapes of the Appalachia region. As with every extractive activity, coal mining has impacted the natural environment.
 - What are the environmental risks of coal extraction?
 - How have the communities navigated the environmental risks?
 - What has been the environmental damage for the coal industry in the region?
 - How have the communities faced the environmental damage?
3. Coal mining has a rich history in the Appalachia region. Local identity is linked with this economic activity, and it can be lived in several aspects of common life, but experiences are not the same for all.
 - Can you mention all the examples shown in the movie where coal is present in day-to-day life? What is it like?
 - What are the differences in gender roles in coal mining?
 - How was the experience of Black miners and their families? What are the differences and similarities in working in this industry based on race?
 - How do those communities remember their past? How can those communities move forward after the changes in the region?



Activities

Essay Prompts

1. Coal mining has an enormous economical influence in the Appalachia region, but the industry has changed in recent times. Miners are not working at the same speed as in the past, and industries related to mining are also impacted. Based on the film: What are the alternatives for communities in the Appalachia region? How can those communities get over coal dependence? What are other ideas that you can think of as alternatives?
2. Mining has been an important economic activity. At the same time, it has damaged the regional environment. What are alternatives to balance that damage in local communities?
3. **Elaine McMillion Sheldon**, the documentary's director, uses dreamlike and poetic moments in the film. Based on what is shown in the film and your interpretation: What do those moments represent? What is the role of one of the girls in those surreal moments? What are the emotions that those elements are trying to express?

Dreaming of the past, the present, and the future

- First, work in small groups to brainstorm historical events that are important to your community. Choose one of the events and explain why it is relevant for the group.
- Then, gather information -online, in the library, and with family members in case you have someone who lived that time- about the event you chose.
- Based on your research, create an artistic expression about the historic event, how that is related to the present social issues, and how it would be in the future. You can write a song, perform a play or dance, make a collage or mural, a short film, or any other artistic creation that you can make as a group.



Beyond the Classroom

Here are other resources to expand your screening of King Coal:

Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

<https://www.arc.gov/about-the-appalachian-region/>

More Elaine McMillion Sheldon's films about the Appalachia region

Coal's Deadly Dust

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/coals-deadly-dust/>

Kentucky Hemp: Big Switch Farm

<https://vimeo.com/145419826>

History of African American and Black communities in the Appalachia region

<https://www.blackinappalachia.org/projects>

<https://www.aaaculturalcenter.org/resources>



What is a documentary?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker **John Grierson** coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker **Robert Flaherty's** romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like **Dziga Vertov** in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. **Leni Reifenstahl's** propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth

The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc: with a beginning, middle, and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

- 1895
The Lumiere brothers develop the first motion picture film reel, capturing brief unedited clips of life around them called 'actualities.'
- 1900-1920
Travelogue or 'scenic' films become popular showcasing exoticized images from around the globe.
- 1926
Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, **Man With A Movie Camera**.
- 1939
John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of war.
- 1960s
The 'cinema vérité' movement began in Europe, followed by the 'direct cinema' in the US. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.
- 1968
The Argentine film, **La Hora de los Hornos**, opened the door to activist cinema of the 1970s, using film as a tool to counter capitalist politics in Latin America.
- 1988
Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.
- 2000s
The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium more affordable to independent filmmakers.
- Present Day
The term 'documentary' comes to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



Media Literacy Resources: Screening with Meaning

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the language of the medium. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Many students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive. Analysis of a media message, or any piece of mass media content, can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

1. **Medium:** the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
2. **Author:** the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
3. **Content:** the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
4. **Audience:** the target audience to whom it is delivered
5. **Purpose:** the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

MEDIA LITERACY STANDARDS

MEDIUM

All Media Is Constructed.

- What is the message, how is it delivered and in what format?
- What technologies are used to present the message?
- What visual and auditory elements comprise the media content?
- What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?

AUTHOR

All Media Is Constructed by Someone.

- Who is delivering the message?
- Who originally constructed the message?
- What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?

CONTENT

Media Is A Language For Information.

- What is the subject of the media message?
- What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
- What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?
- To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?

AUDIENCE

All Media Messages Reach an Audience.

- Who receives the message?
- For whom is the message intended?
- What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- How might others perceive this message differently? Why?

PURPOSE

All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.

- Why was the message constructed?
- Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
- To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
- What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?



Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3

Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2

Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3

Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5

Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

For more information about Common Core standards, visit www.corestandards.org.