

Film Review

Who I Am (2006) - MANchild (2008) - Bitter Memories (2009)

<http://www.scenariosusa.org/>

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The Scenarios USA movies are relevant because the scripts are written by teens and for teens. And they are without doubt the hippest, best-edited, most entertaining sex ed videos ever made.

Salon.com

The content of three student scripted 15-minute videos form an unintended trilogy that deftly flays open the social fabric of American teens as they struggle with peer pressure, ethnic diversity, domestic violence, White privilege, and homophobia. *Who I Am* (2006) addresses stereotypes, racism, and homophobia when White and Black teenagers examine and compare their sexuality in terms of race and class. *MANchild* (2008) redefines masculinity as a young Black male makes sacrifices to help his single mom raise his three sisters, dreams of attending college, and questions what it means to become a man. In *Bitter Memories* (2009) a Latino teenager grows up watching and hearing his father abuse his mother and discovers his own extreme jealousy and violent tendencies towards women. Will the teenager repeat the cycle of domestic violence or learn how to become *un hombre vero* (a real man)?

Who I Am

The trilogy begins with *Who I Am* (2006). Hayley, a Black teenager, delivers a classroom report about public housing in Miami and alleges that developers want to

keep the community separated into racial enclaves and force Blacks into the public projects:

Black people aren't getting any breaks in this poorly planned city. People think it's paradise here, but more like paradise for the white and South American rich folks, not for people like us. Nobody cared 150 years ago, and they don't care today. It's going to be impossible for anyone to live in Miami 10 years from now. And you know where people like us are going to end up? In the projects. You just can't trust any of those people.

Hayley's presentation evokes support from Black classmates.

The teacher calls Veronica, a White student, to the front of the class where she delivers a diatribe against selective gender discrimination. Veronica alleges that if anyone used the N word they would be suspended while no one is punished for calling others faggots, crackers, and dykes:

Everyday thousands of children are told that they are evil or perverted because of the way that they were born. Ten or twenty years ago it was OK to discriminate against Blacks, Hispanics or Jews... But today the only people it's OK to discriminate against are gays. What I find ironic is that previously discriminated-against minorities actually encourage legislation against the rights of homosexuals. Why is saying the "n" word still punishable by suspension in this school but I can still say faggot, cracker, or dyke all I want?

The teacher is concerned because both reports inflamed emotions rather than explored issues. He gives them a team assignment to present a report about helping those with different identities learn to accept and respect each other. Hayley, who thinks White students are wealthy and racist, and Veronica, who considers Hayley and her boyfriend Jamal part of a gay-bashing crew, have to work on a report or their grades will suffer.



Hayley's visit to Veronica's small, messy, and dysfunctional home in a middle class neighborhood reveals that not all Whites are wealthy and content. Veronica lives with her brother while her mother stays with a boyfriend. When her mother visits, she criticizes Veronica's gay lifestyle. Veronica is surprised that Hayley is willing to give up loyalty to her crew of Black friends and confront her boyfriend who accuses her of wanting to have a three-way relationship with Veronica to spice up their love life. Jamal's friends tease him over Hayley's budding friendship with Veronica when they joke, "You ain't pretty enough or white enough for Haley no more." Over the next week Hayley finds herself increasingly attracted to Veronica and has to deal with her bisexual feelings. Hayley tells Veronica, "I'm sorry. I don't know what I want anymore. I don't know who I am." Hayley's best friend Dee approaches her in school and warns her to

stay away from Veronica because everyone is talking. “Look, ain’t nobody gonna tell you this, but I’m gonna tell you. You need to stop going over to that girl’s house. Haley, she’s a dyke! Can’t you see that? Look, I’m only telling you this cause you’re my girl, people are startin’ to talk.” Haley responds, “Well I don’t care anymore” and tells her Black friends she will no longer be ruled by peer pressure and social expectations as she discovers *Who I Am*. The video ends quixotically, leaving the viewer to reflect on irrational homophobia instead of on whether the two girls will experience intimacy.

The students in the Miami high school segregate themselves in and out of class. They experience unity only when they gang up to victimize someone different like a White lesbian classmate or a Black friend who crosses the line to discover herself. *Who I Am* provides the foundation for student discussions about self-segregation, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and peer pressure.

MANchild

MANchild (2008) begins in Cleveland, Ohio, when Tommy turns 18 years old. He helps his mother care for his three younger sisters and makes sacrifices to put their wants ahead of his needs. Tommy devotes himself to being a big brother and surrogate father. He faces a career-threatening dilemma. A schoolmate who helped him make



money illegally is just released from prison. He demands payback and claims he was there for Tommy when he needed to support his family. Against better judgment Tommy accompanies his friend to the scene of a crime, tries to flee, and is arrested by the police. His night in jail serves as an impetus for him to explain to his guidance counselor why he feels different – caught between the joys of being a teen and the responsibilities of being the man in the family. He classifies himself as a man-child when he explains

why he was confused over his loyalty to a friend and participated in a crime. “Well, I feel like I’ve grown up over the past few hours! I’ve been through some things that are supposed to be a rite of passage for the black male. I realize that I’m still growing. Legally, I’m a man! But I still feel like something else...like a MANchild.”

The video includes a lesson plan and activities to facilitate a discussion about young males analyzing and re-examining attitudes about dealing with masculinity and boys becoming men. The learning objectives include:

- Examining assumptions about how and why boys transition to manhood
- Comparing and contrasting representations of masculinity in MANchild
- Critically exploring the concept of a “MANchild”
- Writing a monologue about their own transition into adulthood

After watching the video students use writing journals, notebooks, Tommy's dialogue and the Milestones worksheet to respond to the question of "Manhood: when a boy becomes a man" or "Womanhood: when a girl becomes a woman"? Students are encouraged to decide when manhood or womanhood begins. Is it based on biological, emotional, legal, or traditional/societal advances made in life? This is an opportunity for the students to understand that the transition from boyhood to manhood is framed by the choices one makes. This process of becoming is constant throughout one's life. Watching and discussing this video helps students answer many important personal questions:

- What is the most important message about me?
- What I am going through now in my life?
- Where am I going with my life?
- Where do I want to go with my life?
- Who can I turn to for guidance and support as I consider my choices and priorities?

Bitter Memories

The third video *Bitter Memories* (2009) is set in Pharr, Texas, a farming community on the Mexican border. Rob, an only child, lives with his mother and a verbally and physically abusive father. His mother explains that the only reason she stays with her mean husband is to provide for her son. Rob does not respect his father and experiences a metamorphosis when he recognizes that what he hates most about his father has infected his personality. Rob wants to control what females think and how they speak and act.

At school he meets his best friends Louie and JD, and they joke about girls wearing provocative clothes and being sexy. Louie invites them to a party at his home and asks Rob to bring his girlfriend Ashley because she has many hot girlfriends and wears short skirts. Rob is concerned about Louie's remarks and asks Ashley not to wear revealing clothes.



ROB - Nothing. It's just... I don't think you should wear short skirts like that.

ASHLEY - I thought you liked it.

ROB - I just think you should cover up a little. Guys are all checkin' you out.

ASHLEY - So? Who cares? I've already got a boyfriend.

ROB - Then how come you gotta kiss JD on the cheek all the time?

ASHLEY - Aww. My boyfriend's jealous.

At Louie's party Rob becomes jealous when JD dances with Ashley and cuts between them. Louie wants everyone to play a round-robin-mixed-couple-kissing game where each player holds a playing card on his or her lips by inhaling and passes it to a different gender. If the player stops inhaling, the card falls and they kiss the next person and are out of the game. Rob does not want Ashley to play the card-kissing game. She persists, and in one of the rounds the card falls off her lips and she kisses JD.

ROB - Ashley!

ASHLEY - What? It was an accident.

ROB - Ash, come on. Let's get out of here. I wanna chill with you, alone.

ASHLEY - It's the middle of the game. I don't want to.

ROB - Why, so you can flirt with JD? You've been flirting with him all night.

ASHLEY - What is wrong with you?

ROB - Nothing's wrong with me. I'm not the one who's acting like a slut. You're all throwing yourself on him.

ASHLEY - I can't believe you just called me a slut.

ROB - How do you think that makes me look? You show up dressed all slutty and you flirt with everybody.

ASHLEY - You need to calm down. Stop being such a freak.

Rob loses control. He grabs Ashley who breaks free, and he slaps her face. The guests are shocked and the party game ends. Two teens restrain Rob while Ashley's girlfriends console her. Rob breaks free and storms out of the party. He goes home and has an argument with his father who calls him a little girl and accuses him of disrespecting him. When his mother tries to defend Rob, his father insults her, twists her wrist, and slaps her. Rob's father asks him why he does not want to grow up, show respect, and become a man. Rob tells him, "I don't want to grow up and be like you," and realizes he must avoid repeating bitter childhood memories of his abusive father. *Bitter Memories* is accompanied by a seven-page lesson plan.

The instructional goals require students to examine their attitudes towards traditional gender norms and reflect on their definitions of masculinity with a particular focus on gender-based violence. The learning objectives include:

- Exploring the concept of masculinity
- Identifying and explaining the characteristics of gender-based violence
- Analyzing short film themes and writing final scene original dialogue
- Avoiding sexist, racist, and homophobic comments

After watching *Bitter Memories* students use writing journals and student notebooks to write down, process, and possibly share their personal reflections about the controversial issues. Students share their reactions to the film, the characters, and individual scenes such Rob having breakfast with his mother or his conversations with classmates about the ways girls dress sexy. The teacher should discuss the terms *power* and *control* and how the video depicted physical abuse and verbal insults. It is

important to guide the discussion towards understanding why some males feel pressured to exert control over others, especially females, to show they are dominant and macho (real men). Since the ending to the video is open-ended, groups of students will write, explain, and debate their dialogue for the film's conclusion.

Conclusion

The three 15-minute-long videos serve as springboards to deconstruct teen issues of peer pressure, ethnic diversity, domestic violence, White privilege, and homophobia. The video screenplays and dialogues were written by teens, performed by teens for teens, and cut to the core of each controversial maturation issue. Each video is an excellent example of cinematography. The scripts, dialogue, acting, pacing, sound, sets, and editing are of documentary quality. The viewer is drawn into each scene as a participant and required to make judgments about values, mores, and behavior. The videos can be viewed online without charge on the Scenarios USA website (<http://www.scenariosusa.org/>).

Scenarios USA is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that uses writing and filmmaking to foster youth leadership, advocacy, and self-expression in under-served teens. The organization encourages teens to write about the issues that shape their lives in an annual writing contest called *What's the REAL DEAL?* The winners are partnered with Hollywood filmmakers to transform their stories into award-winning short films. Approximately 15 million viewers annually watch the films at festivals, on television, and in high schools. The films are available on VHS and DVD and range in cost from \$10 to \$160. The three reviewed videos *Who I Am* (2006), *MANchild* (2008), and *Bitter Memories* (2009) cost \$89 each.

Film Credits

Who I Am (2006): Written by Whitney Peters from Miami, Florida. Directed by Jesse Peretz and produced by Julian Valdes and Andy Scheffer.

MANchild (2008): Written by Earlaina Kemp from Cleveland, Ohio. Directed by Rawson Marshall Thurber and filmed by Lee Daniel.

Bitter Memories (2009): Written by Mariella Zavala from Pharr, Texas. Directed by Joshua Marston, filmed by Stuart Dryburgh, and produced by Anish Savjani.