



# Hey, Hey, It's Esther Blueburger: Study Guide

Prepared for FilmMatters by Susan Starkman, B.A., M. ED.

***Hey, Hey It's Esther Blueburger***  
**Teacher Resource Package**  
**Prepared by: Susan Starkman, B.A., M.Ed**

**Synopsis:**

Country of Origin: Australia

Release Year: 2007

Original Language: English

Director: Cathy Randall

Runtime: 103 min

Themes: Peer pressure; Adolescence; Bullying; Sexuality; Parent-Child Relationships

13-year old Esther Blueburger feels like an alien. The girls at her posh private school think that she is a nerd and even her mother pressures her to try and act "normal". Esther chooses her bat mitzvah to break free, escaping her own party and befriending Sunni, the cool girl from the local public school. Pretending to be a Swedish exchange student, Esther starts going to Sunni's school and spending time with Sunni's hip mother, Mary (Toni Collette). Through her experiences with them, Esther eventually realises that being true to yourself is more important than fitting in.

**Curriculum Links**

*Hey, Hey It's Esther Blueburger* can be used to meet the curriculum requirements of the Media Studies component of Grades 7, 8 and 9 English. It is also relevant to Grades 7 and 8 Health and Physical Education (Healthy Living, Personal Growth and Development strand) and Grade 9 Health and Physical Education (Healthy Growth and Sexuality strand).

**Related Links:**

*Esther Blueburger* Official Website:

<http://www.estherblueburger.com/>

A detailed study guide for the film is available for free at Metro Magazine (Click on Study Guides and search for Hey, Hey, It's Esther Blueburger):

<http://www.metromagazine.com.au/index.html>

Students can also search Facebook and My Space where there are pages dedicated to the film.

## Ways Into the Text:

### Genre

One of the ways that teachers can introduce students to *Hey, Hey It's Esther Blueburger* is through a discussion of genre. The film follows the conventions of a typical coming of age film wherein the protagonist moves from a state of innocence to experience. Conflict with parents, difficulties with peer pressure and sexual experimentation are staple features of such films. The central plot revolves around a crisis of identity as the central character struggles to find his/her place in the world.

The list of coming of age films is endless and students will undoubtedly be able to come up with a list of their own when asked. It would be useful for students to compare different coming of age films, particularly ones that deal with female protagonists (e.g., *Mean Girls*) and ones that feature male protagonists (e.g., *Dead Poet's Society*). What are the different issues facing boys and girls as they move towards adulthood? What are some of the issues that both sexes have to deal with?

One film that almost all students will be familiar with is *High School Musical*. Like *Esther Blueburger*, it deals with high school cliques, peer pressure, emergent sexuality and conflict with parents. However, while the themes are similar, the treatment of them is radically different. Students could fill out the chart below comparing the way that both films handle these issues before answering some focussed discussion questions.

	<i>Hey, Hey It's Esther Blueburger</i>	<i>High School Musical</i>
School Cliques (list the different cliques represented in each film. What are the reputations and expectations associated with each?)		
Peer Pressure (What pressures do the main characters experience from their peer group?)		
Relationships with Parents (How are parents depicted in each film? What are the central conflicts between parents and children and are they resolved? If so, how?)		
Male/Female Relationships (How does each film address		

the issue of male/female relationships between adolescents, especially with regard to sex?)		
School Life (What are the attitudes of teachers towards students? What are differences between public school life and private school life?)		
Music (What role do the songs play in each film? Lyrics to the songs of both films are available online.)		

### Discussion Questions:

1. Which film do you think portrays high school life more accurately? Why? Provide specific examples to support your answer.
2. Which film do you think depicts relationships between adolescent males and females more accurately? Why? Provide evidence to support your response?
3. How does Sunni's public school differ from the one depicted in *High School Musical*?
4. How do the schools portrayed in both films differ from Canadian schools? How are they the same?
5. How do the clothes worn by the characters in each film reflect the personality of the wearer? How important are clothes in shaping a teenager's identity?
6. Being "cool" is something that plays an important role in both films. Sunni tells Esther that she "used to be cool" before she turned into a bully and Gabriella tells Troy that he is a "cool guy, but not for the reasons your friends think." What do both of these films have to tell us about the nature of being cool?
7. Discuss the various parent/child relationships depicted in each film (i.e., Esther and her parents, Sunni and her mum, Troy and his dad and Gabriella and her mum. Which character do you think has the healthiest relationship with his/her parent? Why? Support your response with examples from the film.
8. Whom do you think is a more believable character – Esther or Gabriella? Why? Provide specific reasons.
9. *High School Musical* is produced by the Walt Disney Company while *Esther Blueburger* is produced by an independent Australian company. How might that be significant in terms of the way that issues like sexuality and child/parent relationships are depicted in each film?

## Themes

Listed below are discussion questions relating to some of the central issues raised in the film. A more comprehensive list can be found in the free study guide available through Metro magazine.

### **Bullying/Peer Pressure**

One of the issues that *Hey, Hey It's Esther Blueburger* highlights so effectively is the politics of adolescence. The girls at both Esther's private school and Sunni's public school are divided into distinct social groups with clearly defined behavioural expectations. Girls like Esther who don't conform to the norms established by the dominant peer groups pose a threat to the social order and thus are singled out for exclusion and public ridicule. Even when she is accepted as one of the Lion Pits, Esther is under pressure to conform to their expectations, even though she is clearly not always comfortable with their behaviour. Indeed, at one point, Esther herself becomes a bully in order to prove her worth to the other Lion Pits and maintain her own place within the group.

1. What is the role of The Slug in the film?
2. How do girls like Missy establish their roles as leaders within their peer groups? What is the cost of not conforming to their rules?
3. What kinds of cliques do you think would exist at an all-boys' school? How would bullying amongst boys differ than bullying amongst girls?
4. Why does Esther agree to attack The Slug even though she feels an affinity towards her as someone who has also been bullied? How else might Esther have handled that situation?
5. Why does Esther decide to leave the Lion Pits and go back to the group at Rowen that had once tormented her?
6. Sunni tells Esther that the girls at Rowen will "chew her up and spit her out". Why does she think this will happen? Do you agree? Why/why not?

### **Sexuality**

*Hey, Hey It's Esther Blueburger* depicts adolescent sexuality in a gritty, decidedly unromantic light. There is clearly no emotional connection between the boys and girls who engage in a public make-out session. Instead, sex is seen as a kind of badge of sophistication and maturity; the more sexually experienced a girl is, the more authority she carries within her peer group. Nowhere is this more obvious than when Esther caves into the pressure to join a group of Lion Girls who go off with a group of boys in the city. We never see what actually happens (indeed, that scene was edited out of the final cut of the film) but we hear them discuss it afterwards when they meet up again with Sunni.

While the relationships between girls and boys in the film are devoid of any kind of feelings, the bond between Esther and Sunni is a highly intimate one. Although it is not sexual in nature, their relationship carries the hallmarks of a romantic relationship on an emotional level. Esther is highly possessive of Sunni; thus when Sunni kisses the other girl sitting closest to her at her party, Esther feels a sense of betrayal similar to that of a jilted lover. The relationship between Esther and Sunni provides teachers with a springboard from which to discuss the role that the best friend relationship plays in an adolescent's emotional development.

1. Do you think that Esther means it when she claims that she doesn't want to be a 14-year old virgin? Why/why not? What evidence can you provide from this scene to suggest that she is not ready for a sexual relationship?
2. Rewrite the group-kissing scene from the perspective of the boy with the Cheezles stuck in his braces. Do the boys' attitudes towards sex differ from girls' attitudes at that age? If so, how?
3. Why do you think that Esther agrees to join some of the Lion Pit girls who leave Sunni to meet up with a group of boys in the city? How else could Esther have handled that situation?
4. Why does Sunni seem less interested in proving herself sexually than the other girls in the Lion Pits? What do you think has shaped her attitude towards sex?

### **Mother/Daughter Relationships**

Grace Blueburger and Mary (Sunni's mother) could not be further apart in terms of their approach to mothering. Where Grace tries to control Esther and keep her in a sheltered environment, Mary acts more like a friend to Sunni than a parent and is permissive almost to the point of negligence. However, while the two women represent diametrically opposed versions of motherhood, both experience resentment from their respective daughters. The film's depiction of these flawed maternal figures offers teachers the opportunity to discuss with their students the role of parents in a child's development, especially with regard to how parents can best meet the emotional needs of their children.

1. Esther tells her mother that "even a dead stripper would be a better mother than you." Why does Esther think that Mary is a better mother? Do you agree with her? Why/why not?
2. Does Grace ever learn to "see" Esther? Provide specific examples from the film to support your response.
3. What evidence is there to suggest that Sunni is more of a mother to Mary than Mary is to Sunni?
4. In many ways, Sunni acts as a mother figure to Esther. However, like Grace, Sunni also becomes the object of Esther's resentment. What does Esther mean when she says to Sunni that "her little private school duckling is growing up?"
5. Are feelings of resentment towards one's parents an inevitable part of growing up? Why/why not?

### **General Discussion Questions**

1. List three key scenes that you think are crucial to Esther's development. Why are these scenes significant?
2. Is Esther always a sympathetic character? Why/why not?
3. What function does Jacob, Esther's brother, serve in the film? How much alike are Jacob and Esther as twins? How are they different?
4. Why does Esther act so angrily towards her brother's decision to become religious? Do you think that being religious is just a phase that Jacob is going through? Why/why not? (Guiding question: are there any parallels between Jacob becoming religious and Esther joining the Lion Pits?)
5. Esther obviously learns a great deal from Sunni. Do you think that Sunni learns anything from Esther? Provide specific examples.

6. What does Sunni mean when she yells at Esther "you are not Normal, you are not my duck?"
7. How has Esther and Sunni's relationship changed by the end of the film? Do you think that they will continue to be good friends? Why/why not?
8. How do the girls at Rowen differ from the students at Yellowhill? Do you think that both of these schools are accurate reflections of private and public schools? Why/why not?
9. How similar is high school life in Australia as depicted in the film to high school life in Canada? How is it different?
10. How do the songs in *Hey, Hey It's Esther Blueburger* help to convey the key themes in the film? (excerpts from the songs and a special music video made to accompany the song "The Only One" are available on the official website at [www.estherblueburger.com](http://www.estherblueburger.com))
11. The director employs a number of recurring symbols and motifs throughout the film. Pick one listed below and discuss its significance in the film:
  - Normal the Duck
  - Esther's white/red high-heeled shoes
  - Esther's yellow bat mitzvah dress
  - Esther's poem about her name
  - The Rowen ribbon
  - The tie that Esther's father gives her at the bat mitzvah
  - The toilet where both Esther and her mother pray to God