**Study Guide**

**Kes – 1969, Director: Ken Loach**

**Summary**

Set in South Yorkshire, in 1969, *Kes* is Ken Loach’s second feature film and adapted from the semi-autobiographical novel of author Barry Hines (*A Kestral for a Knave, 1968, Michael Joseph Publishing*).

The story revolves around 15-year-old Billy Casper, who is bullied at home and school. Billy’s older half-brother, Jud, a coal miner, treats him poorly and his mother calls him a ‘no-hoper’. He seeks solace in the natural world and fascinated by a fledgling kestrel (‘Kes’), he decides to steal it. He trains it in the art of falconry after stealing a guidebook from a second-hand bookshop because he couldn’t provide the adult authorisation to get a library card.

As Billy’s relationship with Kes develops, his outlook improves. He receives praise from his English teacher at school after speaking passionately about the art of falconry.

Jud asks Billy to place a bet on a horse for him, Billy fails. When Jud finds out that he’s lost money from the winning horse, Jud is angry and punishes Billy by killing Kes. Distraught, Billy buries Kes in a field.

The film is widely believed to be a compassionate portrayal of the working-class at a time of poor prospects and low aspirations.

**Key Characters**

**Billy Casper**

* finds it hard to concentrate in school
* gets into tussles with classmates
* father left the home
* due to leave school with no qualifications
* doesn’t want to join his brother in the coalmine
* despite having poor maths, reading and writing skills, he is resilient, resourceful and independent
* represents hope

**Jed**

* verbally and physically abusive towards Billy
* dissatisfied with working in the coalmine
* makes fun of Billy owning a book
* angered by Billy’s hopeful outlook

**Mrs Casper**

* fails to provide a nurturing home for Billy or Jud
* doesn’t stand up for Billy when Jud mistreats him
* more focussed on her own needs than Billy’s

**Mr Sugden (PE teacher)**

* a comically poor PE teacher: unfit, unfair, ridicules Billy

**Mr Gryce (Headmaster)**

* disinterested in the needs of his pupils
* boring, vindictive and indiscriminate

**Mr Farthing (Billy’s English teacher)**

* respectful of the children and therefore respected
* listens with empathy
* tries to connect with Billy
* genuinely interested in Billy and Kes

**Cultural context**

* **Themes**

Unfit education system

Connection

Aspiration

Self-created opportunity

Wasted potential

Socio-economic status

* **Symbolism**

Billy’s discovery of the fledgling Kestral and his commitment to training in the art of falconry represents his own self-reliance and ability to rise above the depressing mundanity of his daily life.

‘Rising above’ is an appropriate term as it reflects Billy’s wonderment when he first encounters Kes souring through the skies. Kes is clearly a symbol of hope.

Neglected by his family and teachers, he educates himself and becomes skilled, displaying patience and perseverance.

* **Key facts**

Billy’s English teacher was the only professional actor on set. The rest were amateurs, including the Headmaster, who was from a local school.

Billy was played by teen David Bradley who had never acted before.

*Kes* was shot on location at St Helen’s School, Athersley.

* **Genre**

British drama, social realism

* **Motifs**

Loach does not shy away from showing the brutal reality of his protagonists – often inviting controversy for some shocking scenes. He rejects the star system in favour of amateur actors, preferring to cast actors who ‘are’ that character, not just giving a performance.

* **Quotes**

From the trailer: ‘Real people playing real people.’

Tagline: ‘Winged hope’ and ‘Hope takes flight’.

**Critical analysis study**

1. **Study focus – character connection**

A central theme of the film is that of loneliness and disconnection. The film’s central character, Billy, is alone – his father has left, his mother is neglectful, his brother bullies him. He has no companions at school and his teachers have written him off as a dropout. Billy learns to observe the world from a distance. He notices things that others miss in their daily interactions with each other. When he discovers the kestrel fledgling in its nest, he begins to connect with the natural world and in so doing, he finds value and purpose in his existence.

**Activity**

*Kes* was Ken Loach’s first collaboration with cinematographer Chris Menges. Together they developed a new style of filming to demonstrate Billy’s sense of disconnection. How would you describe the camera work in the film? How does it help to emphasise Billy’s loneliness? Find a sequence or shot that demonstrates this.

1. **Study focus – the education system**

Billy develops talents as a falconer despite struggling at school to gain any qualifications. After failing his 11+ and being branded a no-hoper by his mum and teachers, he is biding his time at school. His teachers fail to see his potential, leaving him disengaged and set adrift. He is determined not to end up ‘down the pit’ like his brother, yet he is not encouraged to find his strengths or natural talents.

In an interview from 2008, David Bradley (the actor who played Billy) said that, 40 years later, school children are still not given opportunities to "develop what natural talents… they have". He explained: "I've always felt that given any child, if you find out where their interests lie, you can usually channel them towards that area in regards to [their] future employment… or at least make it a serious hobby."

(*The Quietus Essay, ‘Revisiting Kes: On Education, Edgelands and Eyasses’, Tim Cooke 2016)*

**Activity**

Do you agree with Bradley’s comments? Does his argument still hold true for today’s education system? What is your experience? If *Kes* were set in a modern-day comprehensive school, how would it be different? Create a treatment for an updated version of the story.

1. **Study focus – Edgelands**

‘Edgelands’ are the undefined spaces found between the boundaries of town and country – In *Kes*, we see Billy exploring these spaces and finding an unofficial education, away from the arbitrary governance of school. Billy’s edgelands are punctuated by electricity pylons and overgrown wasteland, and it’s here that he’s truly free. Kestrels too can exist between the two spaces: in fact when Billy first spies one, it flies from its nest in a ruined abbey and lands on a telegraph pole.

**Activity**

Create a storyboard for a short scene depicting your ‘edgeland’ – a blending of rural and urban spaces near you. Think about what these spaces represent to modern society and how you can articulate their significance through film language: camera angles; movement; mise-en-scene; colour & light; sound & music.