HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Whether you’re an educator, administrator, parent, student, or just someone who wants to learn more about media literacy, you can use this guide as a way to discuss the themes in the film. Discussion questions are in blue, and worksheets—found at the end of the guide—are in green. Lessons are aligned with time-coded video modules, and Resources for Students and Teachers offers further reading, further watching, and a list of local and national arts organizations. Above all, we understand that educators are multifaceted artists in their own right, so we encourage you to utilize your own artistic experiences to spark dialogue.

ABOUT THE FILM

A powerful drama about hope in the face of severe adversity, Precious shines a light on the American welfare state, touching upon compelling social and public health issues of generational poverty, sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS, mental health, illiteracy, teen pregnancy, and poverty. Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire, the film is set in Harlem in 1987, where Claireece “Precious” Jones, is a 16-year-old African-American teen who endures unimaginable hardships. Abused by both parents, impregnated—twice—by her father, and betrayed by the city’s educational and social-service systems, she grows up poor, illiterate, obese, unloved, and generally invisible. Referred to an alternative school by her principal, Precious thrives under the mentorship and experimental pedagogy of Blue Rain, her pre-GED teacher. Moving from self-loathing to determination, Precious learns to read, finds her voice and ultimately, herself.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

LEE DANIELS

Lee Daniels is an American actor, film producer, and director. Working his way up from aspiring screenwriter to worker, manager, then owner of a Los Angeles nursing agency, by 21-years-old, Daniels built a financial base to fund his Hollywood dream. After he advanced into casting direction and talent management, in 2001 he produced his first film, Monster’s Ball, which won an impressive array of awards. Known for films that tackle issues of race, image, family violence, and sex, Daniels is an ongoing champion of the “underdog,” expanding opportunities for actors of color while bringing untold stories to the big screen.

ABOUT THE CURRICULUM WRITER

Tracee Worley is an educator and curriculum developer who loves to design student-centered learning experiences. She has developed and implemented k-12 curricula, professional development workshops, and technology-based educational materials through her work with organizations such as Staff Development Workshops, ITVS, Tribeca Film Institute, Urban Arts Partnership, and the Brooklyn Historical Society. Her innovative work has been featured by NBC, NPR, and The New York Times. She holds a B.A. in African-American Studies from UC Berkeley, an M.A. in education from Brooklyn College, and is currently pursuing an advance certificate in Digital Media Design for Learning from New York University.
FILM IN CONTEXT

In 1996, Push by the poet Sapphire was published as a hardcover by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Drawing from her work with young women in Harlem in the 1980s who were living through crises similar to those of the fictional Precious Jones, Sapphire’s Push received critical acclaim for exposing the exploitation experienced by real people whose stories often go untold.

That summer, Director Lee Daniels bought a copy of the book and was struck by the familiarity of personal and systemic dehumanization. “From page one, I sat there with my mouth open: this was a world that I knew intimately,” recalls Daniels, who grew up in West Philadelphia. “I had many relatives who resembled Precious physically, and I had many friends and relatives who didn’t know how to read but somehow got by in life. My neighbors, my relatives and I, we all know the politics of dealing with the social worker, waiting for her to come and hiding certain things so that she wouldn’t see them.”

Set in Harlem in 1987, Precious captures the temperature of a period when the conservative backlash against the welfare state and widespread economic disinvestment from inner-city communities created a class of chronically unemployed and underemployed workers with limited opportunities for economic mobility. Persistent poverty, coupled with the infiltration of crack cocaine into inner-city communities, resulted in the collective vulnerability to a variety of economic, social, and medical outcomes. Inspired by the way Sapphire was able to represent the complexities of urban life, Daniels notes, “By the end of the book I thought to myself, ‘Wow. How do you bring this to the screen?’ Because people needed to know about this world.”

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

BEAUTY
Precious—the illiterate, obese, dark-skinned protagonist of the film—loathes herself for being “so stupid, so ugly, worth nuffin.” On many levels, Precious doesn’t embody the teen archetype we typically see from Hollywood. She continually reflects on her preference for a “light-skinned” boyfriend and develops a crush on the light-skinned Nurse John McFadden (Lenny Kravitz). What does light skin represent to her? What does her longing for light skin reveal about standards of beauty? How do mainstream standards of beauty affect our sense of self-worth? How does her attitude toward her beauty, especially the color of her skin, change over time?

RISK & RESILIENCE
Studies of the effects of poverty have underscored the potentially devastating impact it can have on the emotional, physical, and intellectual development of young people. What kind of negative academic, social, emotional and health outcomes does poverty place Precious at-risk for? Conversely, the study of resilience identifies characteristics that empower some children to succeed, despite seemingly insurmountable difficulties. How is Precious resilient? What other examples of resilience are found throughout the film?

ADULT RELATIONSHIPS
Precious’ pre-GED teacher, Blue Rain (Paula Patton), is the first educator to take an active interest in Precious’ academic success and well being. Research shows that young people who have three or more caring adults (besides parents or guardians) who support them, feel happier and more hopeful, do better in school, and are less likely to rely on drinking, smoking, or drugs to feel good or fit in. How does receiving support from a caring adult affect Precious’ life? How does her relationship with Ms. Rain compare to her other relationships with adults? Can you think of an adult, other than your parent(s), who made a difference in your life? What key characteristics make this person so significant?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS CONT.

SOCIAL SAFETY NET
The film depicts Harlem in the late 1980s, an inner city neighborhood burdened by generational poverty, the emergence of HIV/AIDS, the crack epidemic, and violence. The social safety net (mental health services, public assistance, school meals, and low-cost housing), which is designed to provide assistance to the most vulnerable groups in society, appears to have failed Precious and her family. What impact do stereotypes or preconceived notions about the residents of the inner-city have on the quality of social services? To what degree does racism prevent the development of effective services? Does America have an obligation to help those who are in poverty? What strategies can you think of to improve the social safety net?

LITERACY
According to research, 35 percent of children with reading disabilities drop out of school, and 25 percent (one in four) adults in the U.S. lack basic literacy skills. Nationwide, about seven thousand students drop out every school day and those figures are considerably higher in urban areas. When we are introduced to Precious, she is disengaged in her math class, illiterate, socially isolated, and gets kicked out of school. How do low expectations and substandard education contribute to her situation? How does being illiterate limit a person’s life choices? How does gaining literacy skills impact Precious and the other students at Each One Teach One?

VIDEO MODULES

1. “I’ma Be Normal”
(00:01:19–00:06:12)

2. “School Ain’t Gon’ Help None”
(00:06:13–00:15:10)

3. “Make Me Feel Here”
(00:25:55–00:33:11)

4. “Tell Me About Your Home Life”
(00:43:50–00:51:25)

5. “Soul Holiday”
(01:01:31–01:09:12)

6. “Who Else Was Gonna Love Me?”
(01:32:45–01:42:12)

www.pbs.org/wnet/teaching-children-counts/early-childhood/fact-finder
LESSON 1: PREVIEWING ACTIVITY—EVERYDAY IN AMERICA

Time: 20 minutes

Tools: Pens/pencils, markers, chart paper, *Each Day in America for Children* worksheet

The film *Precious* highlights multiple intersecting forces of oppression. Before viewing the film, introduce students to these issues and discuss the implications of the statistics on the real lives of children in America.

**PART A: Charting Statistics**

Distribute the *Each Day in America for Children* worksheet and ask for student volunteers to read the statistics for each category aloud.

Discuss:

- Which statistic surprised you the most?
- Why are so many children living without the most basic human supports they need to survive and thrive?
- What are the consequences of these statistics?
- Which issue do you think has the biggest impact on your community?
- Is it possible to ensure economic, racial, and educational equity for every child? If so, how? If not, why not?

**PART B: Pre-viewing Questions**

Divide students into pairs (Think-Pair-Share) and ask each pair to discuss their responses to the following questions before sharing with the rest of the class. Students can also work individually and do a "quick write" response before sharing with the class.

Discuss:

- You are about to view a narrative film that portrays the life of a 16-year-old 9th grader who is illiterate, overweight, abused, and pregnant with her second child. What are you most curious about? What don’t you want to see?
- Make a list of words/phrases that you think would describe the daily life of a teen in this situation.
- Who might benefit from learning about this story?

CLASSROOM GUIDE

LESSON 2: PRECIOUS’ BIO-GRAPH

Time: 60 minutes

Tools: Pens/pencils, chart paper, *Precious* video modules 1-6, graph paper

This lesson combines the precision of a graph with the subject matter of *Precious*’ personal experience. Students brainstorm life events that hold significance for *Precious* and then use a rating system to rank their importance from extremely negative to extremely positive. Students then use graph paper to create a visual representation of *Precious*’ life events.

**PART A: Pivotal Events in Precious’ Life**

After viewing the video modules, ask students to consider and share out the pivotal people, places, and events in *Precious*’ life. Record their answers on a sheet of chart paper. Suggestions might include: living in Harlem, being victimized by her parents, having her daughter, enjoying math class, getting kicked out of middle school, getting pregnant with her second child, attending *Each One Teach One* alternative school, meeting Ms. Rain, developing friendships with her classmates, giving birth to Abdul, befriending nurse McFadden, learning how to read and write, disclosing her abuse to the social worker, Ms. Weiss, leaving her mother’s home, learning that she is HIV positive, hearing her mother’s account of her sexual abuse, taking custody of her two children, and making huge gains on her literacy test.

**PART B: Graphing**

Have the students choose 8-10 of the events brainstormed in Part A and give each one a rating from -3 (extremely negative) to +3 (extremely positive). Next, give students a piece of graph paper and ask them to create a visual representation of the information. Students will plot their events on a timeline, with the number of the video modules (1-6) on the x-axis, and positive/negative numbers on the y-axis.

Discuss:

- What geographic influences have shaped her life?
- What relationships influenced *Precious* (positive and negative)?
- What experiences did *Precious* have that she actually enjoyed?
- What experiences were particularly difficult or painful for *Precious*?
LESSON 3: ROOT CAUSES

Time: 40 minutes
Tools: Pens/pencils, Precious video modules 2 and 4, chart paper, Root Causes worksheet

In this lesson, students will use a Root Cause Tree to help define the relationship between the causes and effects of some of the issues raised in Precious.

PART A: Diagramming Root Causes

As a class, brainstorm a list of the social issues highlighted in the film. Students might suggest illiteracy, generational poverty, incest/sexual abuse, racism, standards of beauty, neglect, disability, school failure, and HIV/AIDS.

Break the class into small groups and distribute the Root Causes worksheet. Assign an issue from the brainstorming session to each group. Instruct the groups to write their issue on the trunk of the tree and then discuss what they believe to be the cause(s) of the issue. Have them write each idea on the roots of the tree. Challenge students to think deeper about each cause. Can any of them be explained by a further cause? Then, have the students think about what and who is connected to/affected by the issue (the effects). The students should then include these ideas on the branches. Some question prompts include:

“Roots”—The Causes
  • What are the causes of the issue?

“Branches”—The Effects
  • What/whom does the issue affect and how?
  • What conflicts does the issue create?
  • What challenges will people face if they decide to tackle the issue?

PART B: Root Cause Gallery Walk

Have students hang their trees around the room and conduct a Gallery Walk. Students should view the different root cause trees and note similarities and differences.

Discuss:
  • How does examining the root causes of a social issue help us understand the symptoms (effects) that people are facing in their everyday lives?
  • What are some possible strategies for addressing the root causes of the issues you diagrammed?

LESSON 4: FICTIONAL JOURNAL

Time: 30 minutes
Tools: Pens/pencils, Precious video module 6, chart paper, loose-leaf paper or writing journals

As the film comes to an end, we see Precious stand up to her mother with compassion, take custody of her two children, and take the first steps towards a hopeful future where she can protect and provide for her kids in ways that her parents never did for her. In this lesson, students will imagine what the future holds for Precious after the end of the film.

PART A: Brainstorming

Ask students to brainstorm what Precious’ life will look like after the film ends. Record their answers on a piece of chart paper.

Discuss:
  • What do you think Precious’ life will look like in 6 months? A year? 5 years?
  • How might life be better for her? What challenges do you think might lie ahead?

PART B: Journaling

Have students write a journal entry from the perspective of Precious, detailing what life is like for her after setting out on a path to independence. Ask students to include in their entries:

  • Precious’ hopes for the future
  • Her fears/worries/anxieties
  • Lessons that she has learned along her journey
  • Future plans

*Adapted from the Center for Action Civics’ Root Causes lesson plan*
FURTHER READING

If you’re interested in learning more about some of the issues presented in the film, check out these books.

Speak
By Laurie Halse Anderson
Melinda Sordino starts her freshman year in high school as a social outcast after being marked as a snitch for calling the police to break up the end-of-the-summer party. She is unable to articulate why she called and spends the school year coming to terms with the fact that she was raped at the party. She finds refuge in her art class, and ultimately finds her voice when she needs it the most.

Push
By Sapphire
Clarence Precious Jones is a poor, Black teen who is ruthlessly abused by both parents, pregnant by her father for the second time, and betrayed by the system. After getting kicked out of school and placed in an alternative education program, she meets a determined and radical teacher, who engages her on a journey of education and enlightenment.

The Kid
By Sapphire
Sapphire’s “The Kid,” the sequel to her 1996 novel “Push,” follows the son of Precious Jones as he navigates the same brutal urban landscape as his mother. This dark and gritty novel highlights the devastating effects of chronic sexual abuse and the loss of Abdul’s identity in the foster care system.

The Bluest Eye
By Toni Morrison
Eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, is a poor, young black girl growing up in Lorain, Ohio. Teased by other children for her dark skin, kinky hair, and brown eyes, she yearns to be white, and prays for the blonde hair and blue eyes that she believes will allow her to finally fit in. A powerful examination of our obsession with beauty and conformity.

FURTHER WATCHING

If you liked this film, you might also like some of these other films.

Pariah (2011)
Alike (Adépero Oduye) is a 17-year-old African-American teen who lives with her parents and younger sister in Brooklyn. She is quiet andotiably embracing her identity as a lesbian, and strives to get through adolescence by staying true to herself.

The Color Purple (1985)
Steven Spielberg’s adaptation of Alice Walker’s bestselling novel The Color Purple (1982), chronicles the experiences of African Americans in the segregated south in the early 20th century.

Monster’s Ball (2001)
Monster’s Ball is set in the South where a racist white prison guard (Billy Bob Thornton) begins an unlikely romantic relationship with the Black wife (Halle Berry) of a man he just executed. A story that examines family dynamics, generational racism, and the redemptive power of love.

The Women of Brewster Place (1989)
The film spotlights the lives of a variety of women who live in a tenement on Brewster Place. The story, told over several decades, is a gripping portrait of the contemporary struggles of African American women: racism, poverty, and troublesome men.

GET INVOLVED

Craving more hands-on experience? Check out these organizations.

Generation FIVE
generationFIVE.org
Generation FIVE’s mission is to end the sexual abuse of children within five generations. Through survivor leadership, community organizing, and public action, Generation FIVE works to interrupt and mend the intergenerational impact of child sexual abuse on individuals, families, and communities.

SAFE HORIZON
safehorizon.org
Safe Horizon’s mission is to provide support, prevent violence, and promote justice for victims of crime and abuse, their families and communities. For over a quarter of a century, Safe Horizon has been at the forefront of helping victims of crime and abuse through their crises.

RAINN
rainn.org
RAINN, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, is the nation’s largest anti-sexual assault organization and has been ranked as one of “America’s 100 Best Charities” by Worth magazine.

SAFE, etc.
savese.org
SAFE, etc. is an award-winning national magazine and website on sexual health that is written by teens, for teens. It is part of the Teen-to-Teen Sexuality Education Project developed by Answer (formerly the Network for Family Life Education), and provides information on birth control, condoms, HIV/AIDS & STDs, relationships and more.

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS & TEACHERS

Each day in America for children

- 2 mothers die in childbirth.
- 5 children are killed by abuse or neglect.
- 5 children or teens commit suicide.
- 8 children or teens are killed by firearms.
- 32 children or teens die from accidents.
- 80 babies die before their first birthdays.
- 186 children are arrested for violent offenses.
- 368 children are arrested for drug offenses.
- 949 babies are born at low birthweight.
- 1,204 babies are born to teen mothers.
- 1,240 public school students are corporally punished.*
- 2,058 children are confirmed as abused or neglected.
- 2,163 babies are born without health insurance.
- 2,573 babies are born into poverty.
- 3,312 high school students drop out.*
- 4,133 children are arrested.
- 4,717 babies are born to unmarried mothers.
- 18,493 public school students are suspended.

EACH DAY IN AMERICA FOR CHILDREN

Worksheet

- 4 children are born without birth certificates.
- 6 children are dead by fire or smoke inhalation.
- 17 children are confirmed as abused.
- 48 children are reported missing.
- 235 children are confirmed as neglected.
- 366 children are confirmed as maltreated.
- 12,720 children are confirmed as abused and neglected.
- 1,915 children are arrested.

*Based on calculations per school day (180 days of seven hours each). Source: Children’s Defense Fund, 2011
OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students will use their research and their own expertise to dig to the root causes of their issue. Students learn to use a Root Cause Tree as a model for framing an issue’s causes and symptoms.

Student Objectives:

- Analyze an issue in terms of its symptoms and causes
- Understand what root causes are and how to identify them

Assessment:

- Root Cause Tree

BELL-RINGER: Journal Entry (5 minutes)
Have students respond in their journals: How do you know when someone has a cold?

BEFORE: Root Cause Model (15 minutes)
Explain to students that the signs or indications of a cold are the symptoms. We can tell that someone has a cold if she is sneezing a lot. Draw a large root cause tree on the board and solicit student responses to the bell-ringer. If they are in fact symptoms, put them in the top of the tree. If a student gives you a cause, don’t write it down yet.

Explain that while a symptom indicates that someone might have a cold, it does not help us avoid getting a cold. To avoid getting a cold, we need to look at what causes a cold. Ask students to give you some causes of a cold and write those in the roots of the tree.

Explain that it is difficult to cut a tree down at the trunk (and to solve a problem completely or cure the common cold) but if we could choke out and kill a root (a cause), we can weaken the tree. If we can continue to kill roots, eventually the tree will die. Similarly, if we just focus on the symptoms, and not the causes, all we do is trim branches but keep the integrity of the tree intact. When it comes to our issue, we need to look at the root causes, not the symptoms. We also need to break down the big issue into the many causes that make it such a problem. Each root cause, in turn, can be broken down into more causes and so on.

DURING: Diagramming root causes (10 minutes)
Have students complete a root cause tree for the class’s issue. It might be easier for students to partner up on this activity so they can brainstorm ideas. The purpose here is to have them practice what you just modeled for them with the cold example on their own issue.

AFTER: Root cause forest (10 minutes)
Have students hang their trees around the room and conduct a Gallery Walk. Students should view different root cause trees and note similarities and differences.

CLOSER: Check-in (5 minutes)
Solicit student responses to create a root cause tree on the board that compiles the main ideas from the various trees.
If you want to take this concept deeper or if your students are struggling with their root causes, you can try using the “Five Levels of Why” activity explained below.

Divide students into small groups and give each group a piece of butcher paper. Have them choose one root cause (or they can even choose their main issue if they are struggling with developing root causes) and write down a “why” questions of the issue (e.g., Why is there violence at our school?). They should provide an answer below the question. They then take the answer and turn it into their next question. Use the models below to explain the process with your students.

**Example 1:**

**Level 1 why question:** Why is the rate of STDs rising in Chicago teens?
**Answer:** Because teens are having unprotected sex.

**Level 2 why question:** Why are teens having unprotected sex?
**Answer:** Because they believe they don’t have an STD.

**Level 3 why question:** Why don’t they know if they have an STD or not?
**Answer:** Because they don’t get tested.

**Level 4 why question:** Why don’t they get tested?
**Answer:** Because testing is not easily accessible.

**Level 5 why question:** Why isn’t testing easily accessible?
**Answer:** Because clinics are not well publicized and teens are embarrassed to ask.

**Root Cause:** STD testing is neither convenient nor easily accessible for students.

**Solution:** Have a testing day at school to make getting tested easier for teens.

**Example 2:**

**Level 1 why question:** Why is the rate of STDs rising in Chicago teens?
**Answer:** Because teens are having unprotected sex.

**Level 2 why question:** Why are teens having unprotected sex?
**Answer:** Because they believe they don’t have an STD.

**Level 3 why question:** Why don’t they know if they have an STD or not?
**Answer:** Because they don’t get tested.

**Level 4 why question:** Why don’t they get tested?
**Answer:** Because they don’t know where to go to get tested.

**Level 5 why question:** Why don’t they know where to go to get tested?
**Answer:** Because clinics are not well publicized and teens are embarrassed to ask.

**Root Cause:** Students don’t know where testing can be done, and are embarrassed to ask.

**Solution:** Have a testing day at school to make getting tested easier, and so that teens don’t have to ask where to go.
TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES® STAFF

Executive Director, Tribeca Film Institute®
Beth Janson

Director, Education
Vee Bravo

Engagement Coordinator, Education
Fionia Telegrafi

Schools Program Manager, Education
Caitlin Meissner

Program Associate, Education
Karla Rodriguez

Designer
Julia Yang

ABOUT TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES®

Tribeca Youth Screening Series® is a media literacy program begun in 2006 by the Tribeca Film Institute®. The academic year is divided into two series, screened from September through June in partnership with national and neighborhood partners. These screenings are augmented by in-class sessions led by a Tribeca Teaching Artist, who works with a film-specific curriculum written and edited by a team formed through Tribeca Film Institute®. Schools are selected based on relationship, location, and need; in 2012 we will be working in eight schools in New York and New Jersey. Connect and download free curricula at TRIBECAFILMINSTITUTE.ORG

Additional program support provided by:

Honorable Margaret S. Chin, New York City Council

This program is supported, in part, with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and the New York State Council on the Arts with support from Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

Cover photo: Lions Gate Entertainment

The Tribeca Film Institute® (TFI) is a year-round nonprofit arts organization that empowers working filmmakers through grants, professional development and resources, while also helping New York City students discover independent film and filmmaking.