



Reader's Movie Theater for
The Watsons Go to Birmingham

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This resource provides five powerful movie scenes from *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* for Reader's Movie Theater activities in which the dialogue reflects important trajectories in the characters' development. Embedded within these scenes are highly salient messages about the historical and social context in which the two Watson brothers learn more about themselves. These are crucial events that mark the growth of the boys' character. This Reader's Movie Theater, a text-to-film activity, invites youth to read the movie lines of the characters that populate *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* movie, and to consider the story as it unfolds from each of the characters' perspectives. The *FILM TO TEXT CONNECTION* segments are geared towards students who have read the book, but may or may not have seen the film. The *DISCUSS MOVIE* segments do **not** require that the students have read the book.

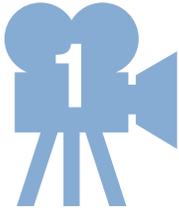
Why Use Reader's Theater to Connect Film and Text?

There are multiple values to the use of the Reader's Theater approach in this Educator's Resource. This resource provides methods to promote student development through healthy and socially relevant media in three overlapping opportunity zones –better known as *The Three-E Framework* (Selman and Kwok, 2013⁵)— which include opportunities for education, entertainment, and ethics. There are many opportunities for Educators to use this material to promote the three E's. Our approach favors focusing on the way the characters in the script make new personal and shared meaning of their experience in conversation with one another.



⁵ Selman, R.L. & Kwok, J. (2013) Counting Hearts and Eye Balls: How to Help Adolescents Make Better Decisions Using Entertainment and the New Media (and Know that You Have Succeeded) In, Winner, E. Festschrift in Honor of the 70th Birthday of Howard Gardner.

The Three-E Framework⁶ for using Reader's Theater in Media:



Educational Opportunities

This zone provides students with opportunities to practice oral language, gain fluency in reading and speaking, and deepen their comprehension of engaging text. *The Watsons* book and movie offer numerous educational opportunities across subject matter disciplines for students to learn about the steps leading up to the Civil Rights Movement, as well as develop understanding about the challenges the movement faced and still faces today. Beyond literacy, lessons pertaining to mathematics, geography, history, and social studies are replete in this historical fiction that is grounded in historical fact.



Entertainment Opportunities

This zone provides students with opportunities to appreciate enlightened and inspiring stories of courage and resilience. It also allows students to share with their peers the viewing of experiences of tragedy and disappointments—experiences all of us feel at one time or another. Entertainment opportunities in *The Watsons* book and movie include those that promote media literacy and those that promote an understanding of how the screenwriters use a variety of approaches to promote engagement with the story, the plot, the characters, and ethical and moral implications.



Ethical Opportunities

This zone provides students—either alone in reflection or together in discussion—to connect important ethical challenges of the past to those they face today. In particular, the movie scenes we have selected and the prompts we recommend are designed 1) to enhance students' self and social awareness, 2) to teach the range of strategies possible to resolve interpersonal and societal conflicts, and 3) to promote reflection upon the personal meaning of experiences, as well as the quality of one's character that is necessary to deal with social injustice in a fair way.

⁶ This framework has been used to analyze a number of creative arts productions, including episodes from *The Simpsons* and *Degrassi Junior High*.

A Note on a Developmental Difference in the Book and in the Film

In many ways, the film story of the Watsons is very true to the story told by the author of the book. However, like many novels that are made into movies, the writer of the story as told in the film, Tonya Lewis Lee, has chosen to make some changes that are more significant and some that are less so. For instance, one difference between movie and novel is that in the book, Byron is about 13, but in the movie Byron appears to be quite a bit older than 13, more like 16 or 17. In some ways this is important, in other ways it is not. For instance, in the book it is clear that Kenny and Byron go to the same school. An important scene involves Kenny being asked by the teacher in Byron's class to read a Langston Hughes poem out loud to the older students. How is this scene portrayed in the film? What might it mean in a story where Byron is well into high school. Another example, Byron's lighting fires in the bathroom has different meaning and implications for early and middle adolescents. For youth who have only viewed the movie, this may not be a significant issue, but for those who have read the book before viewing the movie, a discussion of why the author of the film made this change is worth having.

For the very significant parts of the film where historically accurate civil rights events are an important part of the story, for instance the way Wilona in the movie is always trying to protect the younger children from the painful realities of the resistance to desegregation, including for example the murder of civil rights hero, Medgar Evers, it makes sense that she does not feel the need to protect Byron as an older teenager from such unsettling news. Often, when young adult novels are made into movies, the actors who represent the characters are older than they, the characters, are portrayed in the book. In *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* film, no specific ages are given, but because this movie does such a good job of depicting the relationship of the older and the younger brother, we recommend a brief discussion of what our expectations might be for a 16 year-old Byron and a 13 or 14 year-old Byron.





Overview of Scene 11

In Scene 11, the Watson children are in the living room watching television while their mother, Wilona, is making a grocery list in the kitchen. During this time, a historically accurate news broadcast report about the **Children's Crusade in Birmingham** comes on the television. The news captures the attention of Byron and Wilona. A reporter tells us what is going on:

REPORTER

On Tuesday the Negroes gave vivid evidence that they would no longer accept the patterns of the last one hundred years... the crowd surged into downtown... And outside the south voices were roused to ask why the federal government was not involved...

Wilona and Byron stare at the television. Kenny and Joetta appear oblivious. Then she snaps the TV off.

WILONA

You shouldn't watch that in front of Kenny and Joetta.

Byron looks towards Kenny who is now paying attention to this conversation.

BYRON

Yeah, I understand. Grown-ups only.

WILONA

Byron, please don't start.

Film to Text Connection

Scene 11 is not in the book, but supplements the book's narrative with a strong link to historical events happening during the time of the story. In the movie script, the screenwriter lets us know that Momma does not want Kenny or Joey being exposed to the news.

Why would the scriptwriters include this scene? Why is the Children's Crusade in Birmingham significant for the Watsons?

Does the scene meaningfully support the overall plot of the book? In what ways?

DISCUSS MOVIE

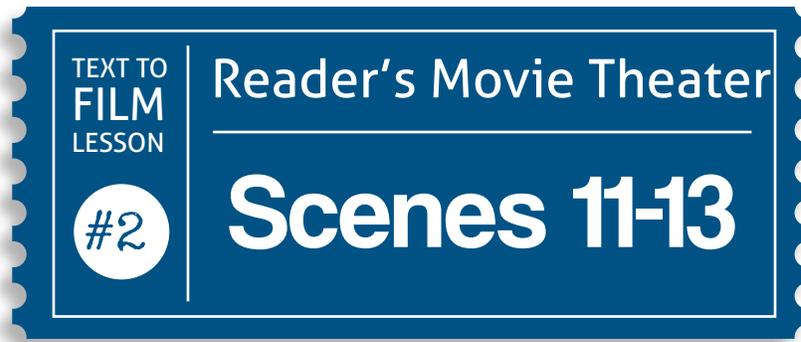
Whole Class Discussion

This scene is an excellent opportunity for students to practice one of the most important competencies in the Voices approach, their perspective taking skills. It is also a good way to build students' background understanding of civil conflict in the 1960's.

Why doesn't Wilona want Kenny and Joetta to see what is reported on the news?

Why are Momma and Byron so interested in the news, yet Kenny and Joetta are so oblivious?

What do you think Byron's opinions are of the Children's Crusade?



Overview of Scenes 11 – 13

Scenes 11 – 13 focus on Byron, his behavior, and the consequently strong reactions of the other members of the Watson family. These scenes combine chapters 5 and 7 of the book. In the film we find Kenny watching Byron through the keyhole in the bathroom door while Byron plays a game he calls: *Nazi Parachutes Attack America and get shot down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and the Flamethrower of Death*. Byron lights one of the newspaper parachutes on fire, then drops the flame into the toilet before it burns his fingers. Momma discovers Byron's dangerous game and is incensed. While he's getting punished, Wilona also discovers that Byron has used chemicals to straighten his hair. This further infuriates his mother, who then allows Dad to shave Byron's head. Scenes 11 – 13 can be viewed as an episode where the screenwriter combines the hair straightening and the fire setting chapters together:

At the Watson's house in Flint, Kenny kneels down at the bathroom door and peeks through the keyhole. He sees Byron inside with a hat on his head. On the top of the back of the toilet, we see a bunch of little newspaper parachutes. Byron stands over the toilet lighting a parachute on fire.

BYRON

Action!

OLDER KENNY (Narrating)

The day things really hit the fan, Byron was making a movie called:

BYRON

Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down Over Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and his Flamethrower of Death. Take 6.

cont'd...

Byron lights one of the newspaper parachutes. It flames up and pieces of burning paper fall to the floor which he quickly stamps out with his feet. He drops the lit parachute in his hand into the toilet just as his fingers are about to be burned.

CLOSE ON toilet as parachutes goes 'round.

BYRON (CONT'D)

Ya hold mine fewer, off we der same!

Kenny watches through the keyhole and sees Bryon salute the toilet.

BYRON

Such a brave soldier deserves our respect so we give him a burial at sea.

Byron goes to light another parachute.

OLDER KENNY (Narrating)

Byron was on take seven when Momma finally wondered why the toilet was being flushed so much.

Kenny, who is still looking through the keyhole suddenly looks up:

KENNY

Momma, I...

Wilona bangs the door open and slams it into the tub. Byron jumps back. Momma grabs Byron by the neck, picks up the matches and she drags him out of the bathroom. Momma throws Byron down on the sofa and stands over him enraged. Joey and Kenny are right behind her, watching the scene wide-eyed. Joey holds onto Kenny in fear for Byron. Momma opens her hand to reveal the matches she grabbed from the room.

WILONA

Didn't I tell you Byron? I told you. One more time... one more time...If I found you burning matches in this house one more time, putting this family in danger I was going to wear you out. And this time I am going to do it. You have left me no choice.

cont'd...

Joetta jumps in front of Byron as Wilona approaches him.

JOETTA

Please Momma, don't do it. He won't do it again will you Byron? Promise her. Promise Mommy you won't do it again!

Wilona has a different affect in her speech. She almost hisses and her southern accent is more pronounced.

WILONA

Joetta move. He needs to learn a very important lesson.

OLDER KENNY (Narrating)

The snake lady had spoken. Her slithering voice left Joey paralyzed and actually made me feel sorry for Byron.

Film to Text Connection

The events in these scenes parallel chapters 5 and 7 of the book. In chapter 5 of the book, Byron is in the bathroom pretending to play a Nazi battle that includes burning newspaper parachutes. Momma's solution for punishment is to burn Byron's fingers, but little sister Joey begs for mercy and saves Byron. In Chapter 7, Byron enters the house through the kitchen where the family discovers that Byron has straightened his hair. Again, Byron angers his parents and this time Dad shaves Byron's head. If students have both seen the movie and read the book, ask them:

**What are the differences between Scene 56 and what happens in the book?
What are the similarities?**

Why would the scriptwriter decide to put these two incidents together instead of at different times in different scenes?

DISCUSS MOVIE

Whole Class Discussion

Sometimes adolescents do things that cause their parents to ask: “What were you thinking?” In this film discussion, ask students:

What was Byron thinking when he made these choices that would obviously provoke his parents?

Why does Kenny call his mother “the snake lady?” What causes Wilona’s voice to change?

Small Group Discussion

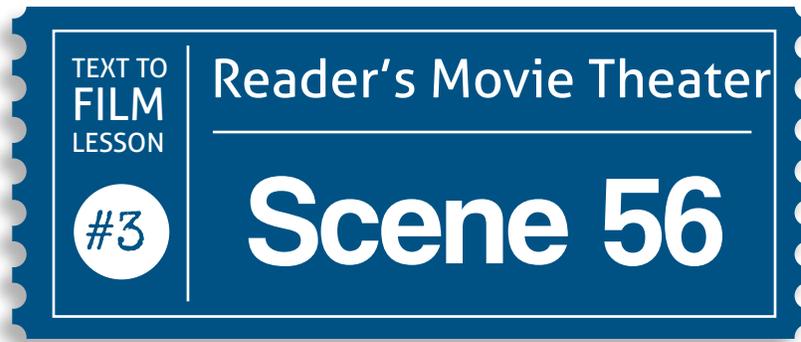
This discussion activity will allow students to delve more deeply into the characters’ motivations and perspectives. It will also provide students with a platform to identify the author’s purpose and to consider how the screenwriter motivates the movie viewer to make important connections between social and psychological issues experienced by the characters.

For the activity, divide students into small groups of 3-4. Pose the following prompt:

Why does Byron play with fire in the bathroom? Why does he straighten his hair? Are these acts of defiance, signals of inner turmoil, or simply normal teen behaviors?

Allow students 5-10 minutes to discuss their ideas within their groups. Remind them to accompany their opinions with reasoning and evidence. Encourage students to ask each other questions about their respective ideas. After students have talked in their small groups, reconvene the whole class and spend 10 -15 minutes allowing students to share their own and respectfully challenge each other’s ideas.

(Possible responses: One position –likely the most sophisticated stance, not to be expected of younger students—is that the injustice Byron is exposed to by the media, like the Children’s Crusade news report, causes him to be upset and fantasize about how to eliminate bad guys or bring justice to disadvantaged people. Another position is that Byron is testing boundaries and wants to assert his strength and independence as someone who is not a child anymore. A third possible position is that Byron is acting like a typical delinquent who disobeys his parents by playing dangerous games and gets a new hairstyle because it’s hip for the times. He wants to be cool.)



Overview of Scene 56

In Scene 56, we have cousins Kenny, Byron, Jr., Sarah, and Naomi talking together in Grandma Sands' backyard. This scene follows several flashbacks to what happened to the children protesters during the historically important Children's March in the spring of 1963. Kenny is amazed by his cousins' stories and asks Sarah to explain more about what happened. The Watson children are astounded by the story, both the events and the parts played by their second cousins, and Kenny begins the following conversation:

KENNY

Weren't you scared?

JR.

Getting our freedom was more important than anything.

BYRON

You keep saying that. What do you mean?

JR.

We want to be equal. We want the same things white kids get. We get their old books, their old uniforms for our sports when they get everything new. They always gonna be ahead cause they get everything first.

BYRON

But they tried to hurt...they did hurt you.

JR.

Sometimes people get hurt in a fight, but you gotta do what you gotta do. And Sarah is fine.

SARAH

Yeah. I'm fine now. I just have a scar. It's okay. I'm kinda proud of it.

cont'd...

BYRON

Did you end up in jail?

JR.

For almost two weeks.

BYRON

Two weeks? What did your parents say?

KENNY

What about school?

JR.

Our parents supported us and were kind of proud of us. And so were our teachers.

KENNY

Proud of you for going to jail?

SARAH

Because of us, the Commissioner lost his job and they have to integrate West End and Ramsey High School and Graymont Elementary. And we're gonna get an equal education.

OLDER KENNY (Narrating)

I could see the wheels turning in Byron's head. If he could make Momma and Dad proud of him for going to jail he was gonna try.

BYRON

What's the story now? Are you all still marching?

JR.

We'll see. Some folks are still trying to keep us out of their schools.

SARAH

But the law now says they have to.

JR.

The law don't matter to some folks. If they don't let us in, we'll march again.

BYRON

Cool...I'd go out there with you guys.

Film to Text Connection

Scene 56 is in the movie, but was *not* in the original book.

**What are the differences between Scene 56 and what happens in the book?
What are the similarities?**

Why would the scriptwriters include this scene?

Does the scene meaningfully support the overall plot of the book? In what ways?

DISCUSS MOVIE

Whole Class Discussion

After they have read over this script excerpt, highlight portions and ask students questions such as:

JR.

Getting our freedom was more important than anything.

BYRON

You keep saying that. What do you mean?

What did Jr. mean by this? Why does Byron prompt Jr. to elaborate?

BYRON

What's the story now? Are you all still marching?

JR.

We'll see. Some folks are still trying to keep us out of their schools.

SARAH

But the law now says they have to.

JR.

The law don't matter to some folks. If they don't let us in, we'll march again.

Again, what does Jr. mean when he says, "The law don't matter to some folks?"

Other questions for discussion might include:

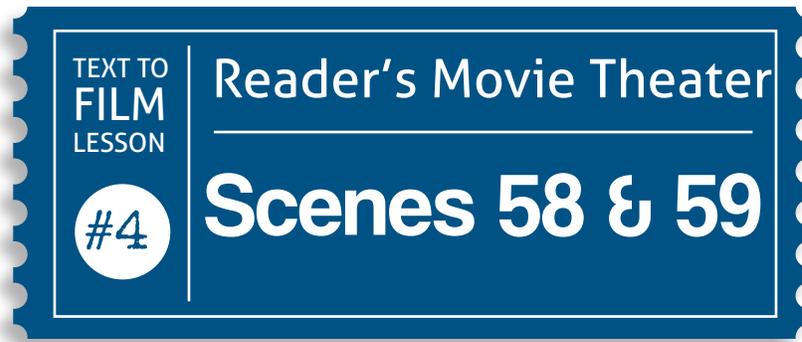
Why would parents and teachers be proud of the Birmingham children protesters when their actions landed them in jail and caused them to miss two weeks of school?

Historical (educational) questions might focus on asking students questions like:

What did it mean to miss two weeks of school back in 1963? What would it mean now?

What kind of non-violence is expressed by a march?

What kind of non-violence is expressed by a refusal to go to a school that is segregated, as well as less well equipped with quality educational materials?



Overview of Scenes 58 & 59

Scene 58 begins with Dad and Byron sitting together in Byron's bedroom at Grandma Sands' house in Birmingham. Daniel Watson is just about to return to Flint, Michigan. Kenny sits on a milk crate outside of the open window of the room he is sharing with Byron. He hears the following conversation between his father and his brother:

DANIEL (DAD)

By the time you wake up I'll be half-way home.

BYRON

Yup.

DANIEL

Byron, I need you to be the man of the house while I'm gone. Can you do that for me? I know you can, but will you?

BYRON

What do you mean?

DANIEL

I mean, I don't like leaving my family down here in the segregated south with bombs going off without me being here, but I've got no choice. I have to go to work and your mother is determined to spend some time with her mother.

BYRON

So what do you need from me?

DANIEL

I need you to think before you act because your actions have real consequences down here. You are the one I know I can count on.

cont'd...

Transition to Scene 59, where Kenny pays extra close attention when he hears his father mention his name to Byron. Daniel and Byron continue their conversation.

DANIEL

Your mother and I are hard on you because we know what potential you have. If you worked at it you could do as well as Kenny does in school. Kenny is still just a kid. Please keep an eye on him for me. I think Birmingham is hard on him.

OLDER KENNY (Narrating)

Hearing Dad tell Byron I was weak made me realize I needed to find a way to show them I wasn't really just Poindexter the punk.

Film to Text Connection

Scenes 58 and 59 are in the movie, but are *not* in the original book.

**What are the differences between these scenes and what happens in the book?
What are the similarities?**

Why would the scriptwriters include this scene?

Does the scene meaningfully support the overall plot of the book? In what ways?

DISCUSS MOVIE

Whole Class Discussion

This scene is largely about family relations and the important ways in which children are encouraged to mature and take on new responsibilities. However, there are important and educationally highly relevant facts embedded in the dialogue between a father and his oldest son. Prompt students to consider:

What are Byron's responsibilities? What might they be today, as compared to the summer of 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama?

Consider when Daniel says to Byron:

“I need you to think before you act because your actions have real consequences down here. You are the one I know I can count on.”

What is the drama here? Do you think in Byron's case, Dad is right in saying: I know you *can* act responsibly, but you have to decide if you *will* act responsibly.



Overview of Scene 66

In Scene 66, Kenny and Byron are in their bedroom at Grandma Sands' house in Birmingham. Kenny thanks Byron for not telling on him for almost drowning at Collier's Landing. Kenny lays in the bed tossing and turning a bit. Byron who is half asleep on the floor hears him stir:

BYRON

How are you feeling?

KENNY

Tired.

KENNY

Hey, By? Thanks for not telling Momma and Daddy about Collier's Landing.

BYRON

No problem, baby bruh. You probably will be tired all day. I'd take it easy if I were you.

KENNY

Yeah.

BYRON

Don't worry. I'll cover for you. They would blame me anyway so it's in my best interest to help you out. If anyone asks, I'll tell them I tired you out running you around the lake. Now I'm going back to sleep myself. Those crickets kept me up all night.

KENNY

Hey, By? You ready to go home?

BYRON

I don't know. I might be able to do some good down here.

cont'd...

KENNY

What? You would stay even if you don't have to?

BYRON

I don't know.

KENNY

But, living here is much harder than living at home.

BYRON

But if this is your home you gotta make it work.

KENNY

I'm glad Momma left here and never came back. I hope it's a long time before we come back down here again.

KENNY (CONT'D)

You think you're coming home with us?

BYRON

We'll see.

Film to Text Connection

Scene 66 is not explicitly described in the book, but parts of it are implied in Chapter 14. The scene provides context for inferences that may have already been made by the reader. In the book, at the beginning of Chapter 14, Kenny describes himself as having all the energy knocked out of himself for a few days after his near tragic experience with the "Wool Pooh." He describes himself as sleeping under a tree that Sunday morning when the bombing occurs. In the movie script, the screenwriter adds an important discussion between Byron and Kenny on that Sunday morning.

**What are the differences between Scene 66 and what happens in the book?
What are the similarities?**

Why would the scriptwriters include this scene?

Does the scene meaningfully support the overall plot of the book? In what ways?

DISCUSS MOVIE

Whole Class Discussion

This scene is an excellent opportunity for students to practice one of the most important competencies in the *Voices* approach, their perspective taking skills.

BYRON

How are you feeling?

KENNY

Tired.

KENNY

Hey, By? Thanks for not telling Momma and Daddy about Collier's Landing.

BYRON

No problem, baby bruh. You probably will be tired all day. I'd take it easy if I were you.

KENNY

Yeah.

BYRON

Don't worry. I'll cover for you...

Why does Byron treat Kenny so kindly here? Why didn't he tell on Kenny for swimming at Collier's Landing?

How do you think Kenny feels about Byron's loyalty?

KENNY

Hey, By? You ready to go home?

BYRON

I don't know. I might be able to do some good down here.

Why does Kenny wonder if Byron is ready to go home? And – why is Byron's answer hesitant? For what reasons would Byron want to stay in Birmingham?

KENNY

What? You would stay even if you don't have to?

BYRON

I don't know.

KENNY

But, living here is much harder than living at home.

BYRON

But if this is your home you gotta make it work.

What does Kenny mean when he says living in Birmingham is harder than living in Flint? Why would he think this way?

If Birmingham life were so much more difficult than Flint, why would Byron want to stay?