



## SYNOPSIS

This Is England is the story of a summertime school holiday, those long weeks between terms where life-changing events can take place. It's 1983 and school is out. Twelve-year-old Shaun (Thomas Turgoose) is an isolated lad growing up in a grim coastal town, whose father has died fighting in the Falklands War. Over the course of the summer holiday he finds fresh male role models when those in the local skinhead scene take him in. With his new friends Shaun discovers a world of parties, first love and the joys of Dr Marten boots. Here he meets Combo (Stephen Graham), an older, racist skinhead who has recently got out of prison. As Combo's gang harass the local ethnic minorities, the course is set for a rite of passage that will hurl Shaun from innocence to experience.

To get an overview of the film, go to [www.filmeducation.org/thisisengland](http://www.filmeducation.org/thisisengland) (STUDY GUIDE section) and watch **CLIP 1**.

## CHARACTERISATION

In order to cast the character of Shaun, Shane Meadows held many auditions with children in inner city workshops all over the country. Invites to casting sessions were given out at holiday camps around the east coast, particularly Grimsby. It was at The Space Project, a scheme run for disadvantaged kids, many of whom have been excluded from school, that they found the quality they had been searching for: a canny combination of innocence and hardness that set these children apart.

Shaun's position as the lead character means that the narrative is tied to his perspective and we understand things from his point of view.



The opening scenes show Shaun in his bedroom in the house he shares with his mum. Significantly in this sequence we see a photograph of his father, and this relationship is key to the motivations of the character.

## KEY QUESTIONS

- + What were your first impressions of Shaun?
- + Did you like him?



## THE GANG

Shane Meadows found many of the members of the skinhead gang through The Carlton Television Junior Workshop. Joe Gilgun was cast as Woody, the unofficial boss-man of the skinheads, who befriends Shaun after he has been bullied for wearing flares on his last day at school.



In the key roles of Milky and Lol, Shane cast his old friends Andrew Shim and Vicky McClure who he worked with on *A Room For Romeo Brass*. Milky is the only black character in this film that deconstructs racist attitudes, while Lol is the leader of the girls.

Stephen Graham who plays Combo, the catalyst for Shaun's passage into adulthood, was one of the first people cast in *This Is England*. Stephen seemed perfectly placed physically and geographically to play the part of Combo, but he also brought a whole other layer of complexity to the role. His own background is in fact mixed race, and he drew on his confusion growing up to add depth to Combo's back-story.

The group dynamic in the film helps to progress the narrative and the groups combine a number of influences. Shaun's relationship with his school provides an insight into the isolation that is a part of Shaun's life. As Shaun walks home he meets Woody and his gang. We see the power struggle between Tubbs, Pukey and Shaun for Woody's attention. Shaun is made to feel welcomed and his problems with the boys at school begin to disappear as Woody makes light of them and encourages Shaun to laugh at the situation.

## KEY QUESTIONS

The tensions in the group remain visible as the film progresses; can you think of any other examples of the characters struggling for Woody's attention?

- + What does Shaun get from being part of the gang?
- + When these conflicts arise, think about the ways they are resolved (before we meet Combo).

For Tubbs and Shaun there are key moments when their place in the gang comes up for discussion. Consider these two scenes:

- + The group prepare to spend a day out together and Tubbs has been sent round to apologise to Shaun and to get him to come along.
- + Later we see Tubbs in the abandoned hall; he speaks about how he feels left out now Shaun has joined them. Can you relate to this?

Both these sequences highlight the effect that Woody has as a leader. How would you describe him as a character? How does he relate to the other members of the groups (particularly Shaun)?

## ACTIVITY

Think about the changes we see in the gang from a narrative perspective: how can you describe the phases that the gang go through? Write your descriptions under the following headings:

- + Equilibrium (e.g. 'Woody as gang leader' phase)
- + Disruption
- + Resolution



## COMPARING CHARACTERS

The biggest change that occurs to the dynamics of the group is the return of Combo.



### ACTIVITY

What were your first impressions of this character?

Contrast the two gang leaders, using two key scenes to support your points. Use these sub-headings in your analysis for each character:

**DRESS:** Use of language / tone of voice

**ATTITUDE TO SHAUN:** Relationship to the other members of the group

**SKINHEAD CULTURE:** Woody and Combo are similar in terms of dress, however the way in which they behave is very different. The subculture that unites them is what it means to be a skinhead.

### KEY QUESTIONS

+ What associations come to mind when you hear the word 'skinhead'? Make a list.

+ What behaviours, attitudes, dress, etc. would you expect?

During the film Combo makes reference to being an 'original skinhead'. He talks to Milky about how being a skinhead during that time was about black and white harmony.

## SKINHEADS

Today, racism, neo-nazism, thuggery, and all the other forms of anti-social behaviour associated with 'skins' have become the snap-judgments most people make. It wasn't always like that. The original skinheads hailed from the late sixties. It began with Mods who were welcomed into the



world of reggae clubs in London, such as Ruby's on Carnaby Street. Here they discovered not only Ska music, but the key style components that defined the original skinhead look. The skinhead culture was taken up by black and white working class kids working in shipyards and on factory lines, who bonded over a love of reggae and forging a particular kind of English identity, with braces, suits, boots, and sometimes a Cromby hat atop heads shaved, military style. There was no peace and love for this lot, life was a series of hard knocks and this tough, fighter's appearance was how they chose to express those truths.

The second wave of skinheads, in the early eighties, were in one sense similar: just kids from council estates finding their place by being different together, like teenagers everywhere. Allegiance was now sworn to bands that acknowledged the heritage of Ska music, like Madness or The Specials. At the same time a new genre sprang up in punk infused Oi! Music, romper-stomper, screwdriver tunes, charged for fighting. Dressed in Dr Martens and with heads shaved military style, these kids would give the V to anyone foolish enough to give them the eye.





These were teens who came from areas of high unemployment looking for solidarity beyond Thatcher's 'me' culture. They were abandoned by society and that, of course, made them vulnerable to the advances of the National Front.

As a second wave skinhead who had always been aware of the sixties legacy, Shane Meadows (director of *This Is England*) felt it was essential to create a balanced and truthful picture of the scene as he had experienced it. *'The skinheads, because of their aggression and outward appearance, they're almost soldier like, were I suppose almost handpicked to become soldiers for the National Front. You don't see the contradiction that you're being indoctrinated into the National Front whilst listening to black music. When I first heard about the National Front, the picture that was painted to me was a Churchillian vision of Asian families rowing into the white cliffs of Dover on boats, and that skinheads would be on the beaches fighting to stop them entering the country. As a twelve-year-old kid that's quite a romantic image. It's almost like 'what your granddad did.'*

*'When you're twelve and no one in your town can get a job, and someone comes up to you and says 'these people are to blame' it's easy to believe,'* says Shane of the racism he encountered through skinheads. *'I did for about three weeks, some people still believe that as adults and that's frightening.'*

To capture the inherent contradictions of skinhead culture, Shane presents a motley crew of believable characters whose behaviour is often as farcical as it is threatening and disturbing. Combo, the racist gang leader has L plates on his car, and graffiti-ing 'Fuck Off' becomes a challenge of spelling, for example. They are losers, but Shane never lets you forget that there is always a reason behind their behaviour.

## KEY QUESTIONS

Think carefully about the last sentence of the paragraph above and this next quote from the film's director Shane Meadows:

*'It's not to do with colour so much, it's to do with identity and belonging.'*

Given factors like the high unemployment and the circumstances of their own lives (such as Shaun and Combo's) can their actions be understood (although not condoned)?

## MEADOWS AND MASCULINITY

One of the key themes in the film is masculinity. Earlier we looked at the oppositional characteristics between Woody and Combo; both these characters offer very different representations of masculinity and we also see other versions presented in the film.

Through the character of Shaun we see a number of factors come together that form part of his identity at that particular time, such as his relationship to his father, his relationship to the various members of the gang and how this manifests itself in terms of a sense of confidence and control over his life.



## KEY QUESTIONS

- + How much do you think the ways these issues are represented are gender specific?
- + Can you imagine this same narrative if the lead character were a girl?

Masculinity is a theme that has been returned to by the director Shane Meadows in this film. This theme is important to him on a personal level as a motivating force toward filmmaking, as well as being a theme we can see evidence of in his body of work.





Shane first hit on the idea for This Is England whilst working on his preceding film, Dead Man's Shoes, a story of victimisation, abuse of power and revenge in rural England. It was a project that made the director reflect on the nature of bullying and violence. Specifically there was an incident from his own life, when he was about twelve-years-old and had become a skinhead, when as he explains:

*'I thought the be all and end all in life was that kind of hard masculinity in men. I craved to be like a Jimmy Boyle, or a John McVicar, or a Kray. It's like kids who are into Beckham, I was into Jimmy Boyle in the same way. I wanted to see men fight, and there was an act of violence that I almost prompted, and that was something that became very difficult to live with.'*

Ironically it was this experience, alongside the example set by a figure like Jimmy Boyle, a criminal who became an artist, which ultimately became very influential for Shane in a positive way. Of his childhood in Uttoxeter in the eighties, then a small Midlands town with a population of around 10,000, high unemployment, and the epitome of Thatcher's rural dispossessed, the director reflects:

*'Coming from a town like Uttoxeter, nobody expects you to leave and become a filmmaker. In a way my reaction to that act of violence was the first stepping stone to getting out of that way of life.'*

## KEY QUESTIONS

- + Do you think the different aspects of masculinity that are shown through various characters are realistic?
- + Can you relate to them?
- + Do you think that the boys and young men we meet in This Is England are under pressure to conform to a 'hard masculinity'?
- + Do you think that these pressures are still prevalent?
- + Does the meaning of the phrase 'what it means to be a man' change as individuals get older?

## IS THIS ENGLAND?

Throughout the film we see competing ideas of national identity. There is a version offered via Combo and later with his association with the National Front, this overtly political group offers solutions to the problems of unemployment and a sense of national pride based on exclusion.

### ACTIVITY

- + To work on the following activity, it is necessary to watch **CLIP 2** – which can be viewed at [www.filmeducation.org/thisisengland](http://www.filmeducation.org/thisisengland) (CLIP ANALYSIS section).
- + Looking at this short sequence and listening to the comment made by the producer, do you think that Shaun can be described as racist?
- + Or can you see his motivation in a different way? Consider in particular his treatment of Mr Sandhu and the Asian boys playing football.

The other version that we see is less overtly political, the gang prior to Combo's arrival is arguably a more inclusive version, where the things that individuals have in common is what connects them.

At the end of the film we see Shaun take the English flag, throw it into the sea and watch it slowly sink.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- + How do the connotations of the flag change for Shaun?
- + What does the English flag mean to you?
- + Having looked at the film do you think that these associations have changed over time?
- + Does the flag have group specific association now?
- + Is the flag something to which you feel any kind of allegiance?
- + Where do these ideas/feelings come from?

