

# STUDY GUIDE FOR THE FILM **32A**

Ireland 2007, written and directed by Marian Quinn

Questions for the class are organized in two categories: before viewing (bv) and after viewing (av)

## **SYNOPSIS:**

The film **32A** (a bra size) is set in the teenage world of Dublin, Ireland in 1979. The film centres on the relationships between the main character, the “not even 14 year old” Maeve (Ailish McCarthy), her best friend Ruth (Sophie Jo Wasson), her two other best friends of the girl group Orla (Orla Long ) and Claire (Riona Smith ), and the two years older local heartthrob Brian (Shane McDaid). Living a rather sheltered life with her family on the South Side of the city, Brian asks Maeve to go out with him to a club located on the more unknown North Side. Unfortunately, this is the very same night when Ruth, following Maeve’s own idea, wants to go and meet her own father, who has been away unexplainably for many long years. Ruth clearly needs the emotional support of all her best friends for this first-time meeting, including Maeve’s. But Maeve desperately wants to go out dancing with Brian. What is she to do? Without saying a word even to her best friends, Maeve decides to secretly go out with Brian, meeting him at the pre-arranged fish and chips shop. The night, however, develops unexpectedly for both Ruth and Maeve. Together with Orla and Claire, Ruth eventually meets her father, who is sadly incapable of expressing his fatherly love for her. Feeling hurt and confused, Ruth also feels betrayed by Maeve, who wasn’t even there when Ruth needed her most. Meanwhile at the club, Maeve feels sick and rejected when she sees Brian starting to kiss another older girl during a slow dance. Feeling hurt, she sadly walks home all alone. Feelings between Maeve and Ruth now begin to run high, with each accusing the other of the worst things. Eventually, even Orla and Claire say that both have gone too far and need to grow up. Ruth finally thinks about writing to her father, despite her mother’s misgivings. As for Maeve’s relationship with Brian, they both decide to “Just leave it. No hard feelings”. The film ends with Maeve celebrating her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday party happily reunited with all her best friends. For despite all the fights, best friends remain just that...best friends!

Marian Quinn not only directed **32A**, her first full-length feature film, she also wrote the script: a rather short and sketchy one in her own words. While many film directors like having a well worked out and detailed script when shooting, Quinn uses her short film script to full advantage. Keeping the story-line relatively simple, Quinn wilfully decides to take the time - 89 minutes in all - to consciously create an atmosphere of how it felt like being a 13 year old girl living in Dublin in 1979. This is certainly one of the strengths of the film.

## **QUESTIONS:**

- bv: Why are best friends important?**  
**What role does music sometimes play in a film?**  
**Marian Quinn directed the film as well as wrote the script. Why is this generally a good thing?**

av: **Would you have liked to have lived in the teenage world of Dublin Ireland in 1979?**

**Was Maeve selfish, when she decided to go out with Brian instead of being with Ruth?**

**Do you think a man could have directed this film? If yes, how would it differ?**

It is interesting to note, that the film **32A** has a number of unusual features. Firstly, it is not really a classic “girl meets boy” love story. **The film is essentially about friendship.** It is about being and staying the best of friends, precisely at a time when they’re going through the tribulations of becoming teenagers. Nor is this film strictly speaking a “coming-of-age” film either. No one loses their virginity in this film. Quinn consciously puts aside this whole issue, concentrating instead on creating the emotional world of teenage girls, who have not yet experienced having sex. For Quinn, this film is about what teenage girls undergo before their “first time”.

Secondly, while Quinn goes to considerable length to present a realistic image of Dublin life in 1979, she takes an extraordinary amount of time to carefully create a certain mood, and **sense of feeling of how it was like growing up as a teenage girl** in this period. For example, a number of scenes are set in the film showing the four girls just hanging around, gossiping about everyone they know. Although these scenes do not necessarily develop the storyline, they do give us an important sense of what young teenage girls tended to have been doing while together a large part of the time. Another indication can be found in the music, where Quinn once again takes an unusual amount of time to develop an emotional setting. Thus, unlike many films today with their numerous quick music clips and correspondingly long list of song credits at the end of the film, in **32A** only eight songs are credited. What is even more remarkable, almost all the songs are heard in practically their full length. Good illustrations of this point can be found in the opening sequence of the film (“I’m A Woman”), the scene at the dancing club (“Boys Keep Swinging”) and final sequence of the film with the screening of the credits (“Shot it Out”). In short, while Quinn makes a great effort to present a realistic picture of life in Dublin among teenage girls in 1979, the film should be more *felt* as realistic, than seen as realistic.

Thirdly, **Quinn presents the adult world in a quite stark light.** In **32A**, the adult world is largely populated by figures who are repressed (parents and teachers), repressive and vindictive (teachers), non-communicative (parents) and at times literally perverted (the flasher). Far from offering any role models to emulate, this picture of the adult world can only give us a sense of fore-boding. Maeve’s father punishes her without first sitting down and talking with her. Both Ruth’s father and mother have enormous difficulty in talking and getting close to her. Indeed, throughout most of the film, parents are generally presented as over-whelmed and largely unable to communicate. Moreover, in their strict Catholic school, the nuns and priests are seen as old, moralistic and vindictive. Only towards the end of the film do Maeve’s and Ruth’s parents appear in a more caring and loving light. For example, Maeve’s parents begin to open up and talk to her and they both help organise Maeve’s surprise birthday party. There is also a tender moment when Ruth sneaks into her mother’s bed simply to be with her. While these images are certainly one-sided, it could be argued that **32A** is a good film to be seen not only by young people, but also by their parents.

## **QUESTIONS:**

- bv: Can anyone give an example of a classic “boy meets girl” love story?  
Why are they so popular?**
- av: Is this film about love or about friendship?  
How would you describe Maeve and Ruth?  
Why is Brian such a heartthrob? Would he still be one today?  
How are all the adults in the film presented?**

## **THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF THE FILM**

### **The Story**

Quinn has inserted a number of **dramatic turning points** in the story. It is important to locate and identify these turning points, for they tell us how the story and therefore the film as a whole may develop. In the first 30 minutes of the film we are introduced to Maeve and her three best friends as well as the local heartthrob Brian. Even after Maeve’s first kiss with Brian, all the characters continue to give rather happy impressions of themselves. Yet, once it becomes known that Maeve is with Brian, tensions arise among the girls. Ruth says to the others, “He’ll dump her fast”. This hurts Maeve, who now runs after Brian. Returning, one of Maeve’s friends even warns her, “You’ll get yourself a name!” This hurts Maeve even more.

The next 35 minutes of the film have two turning points. The first one deals with the short relationship between Maeve and Brian. Inviting her out to a club, Brian starts dancing and kissing another older girl. Maeve feels both degraded and rejected. The second turning point centres on the relationship between Maeve and Ruth. Sadly walking home from the club, Maeve meets Ruth, who has just had a highly emotional first-meeting with her father and feels betrayed that Maeve was not even there when she needed her. Ruth utters angrily to Maeve, “Now I know who my friends really are!” Both are now hurt and very angry with each other.

In the remaining 25 minutes of the film, these two key relationships are resolved. In the first one, Maeve and Brian decide to break off their relationship with “no hard feelings”. Regarding the second relationship, however, tensions between Maeve and Ruth continue to rise with both of them making horrible accusations of each other. Tensions between them only begin to subside towards the end of the film, when Maeve and Ruth both laugh together at the local flasher, who like an on-going gag in the film is finally caught. In the last scene, we see Maeve surprised and happily celebrating her 14<sup>th</sup> year old birthday party together with all her best friends.

## **QUESTIONS:**

- bv: Is it fair to title a film about teenage girls 32A, a bra-size?  
Is it normal to fight with your best friend?  
Boys also have best friends, don’t they?**
- av: When do we first notice tensions rising among the four girls?  
When do you think things have gone too far between Maeve and Ruth?  
Despite all the talk about bra-size, do Maeve and Ruth actually grow as people?**

## THE DRAMATIC FILM QUALITIES

While Quinn clearly uses the story for dramatic purposes, it is very important to note, that this is only one element in how a film can generate a certain emotional dynamic. Quinn also carefully composes and mixes a number of images and sounds in order to create the dramatic mood she wants. Seen as a whole, **32A** tends to become darker and wilder as the film goes on, creating a certain dramatic effect. This can be seen in a number of ways.

One way is in how Quinn uses the **music** in the film. For a start, most of the songs in the film are heard in their full length, allowing the lyrics and mood of the song to fully influence the mood of the scene. Indeed, the songs are often a commentary of how the characters themselves feel in the scene. A good example of this is the song “Boys Keep Swinging” by David Bowie when Maeve and Brian are at the dancing club. Moreover, as Maeve begins to emotionally leave her sweet little world becoming more unsettled, the songs begin to show a darker, wilder side of life. That Maeve is again sure and contend with herself is expressed during the final credits with the last song “Shot it Out” by Donna Lewis.

Quinn is also very clever in using the role of **gossip** as a dramatic element. At the beginning of the film, the four girls are often shown gossiping about their friends and who is going out with whom. In one scene early on in the film, the four girls are just sitting around on a street bench speculating about the bra-size of all the girls and women passing by. It’s all a sort of innocent harmless chatter. Once Maeve starts going out with Brian, however, she is warned that people might begin to gossip about her and that she should be very careful not to get a bad name. Discarding this, Maeve goes to the dance club, where she hears older girls in the restroom talking about the girls they know who have become ostracized for getting pregnant. Desperate, these girls may have to even leave Ireland in order to get an abortion. Here, Quinn introduces us to the world of older girls, where gossip can have very real consequences. Eventually, Maeve’s father also hears about her going out to the dance club, and punishes her severely. Finally, when Ruth accuses Maeve of being a “bad girl” and she in turn accuses Ruth of being an illegitimate “bastard”, the authorities at their Catholic school take reprisals and punish them both. Quinn therefore shows in the film how Maeve’s travels from a world of innocent girl-talk to a world where gossip can have serious consequences.

Another element carefully used by Quinn for dramatic effect is the introduction of **the boy’s world** in the film. This world is literally a darker more sinister place. It is a darker place because Maeve can only meet older boys mainly a night, at parties or when they are drinking and rowdy on the street or hanging around the dark corner of a park. Indeed, there is only one scene in the whole film, when Maeve is the only girl among many boys. It is, when Brian takes Maeve to the park to meet his friends, before they both go dancing. All the boys are older and are drinking, smoking grass or selling cheap liquor to idiots. While appealing to some, this world is very different to the one known by Maeve. For Maeve, this world is one which is ominous, yet darkly intriguing.

## QUESTIONS:

**bv:** How do girls in a strict Catholic girl school meet boys their age?  
Have you ever gossiped about someone you liked and felt sorry afterwards?

- av: What role does gossip play in the film?  
Should Maeve have told her friends or parents where she was going?  
Does the music fit well into the film?**

### **ANALYSIS OF A FILM SEQUENCE**

As film director, and indeed as script writer, Quinn's challenge is to make a film which is convincing and artistically coherent. She does this by bringing together the storyline with visual and sound elements which she hopes correspond. This is not an easy task, since changing any one element inevitably changes the rest. This is why each film and indeed even each scene presents its own peculiar problems.

We can best see this in **32A** at the moment when - according to the story - tensions between Maeve and Ruth are at their highest and most dramatic. After saying the most terrible things to each other, both characters are developing separately very very fast. This presents Quinn with a problem: how best to show this growing emotional separation between the two main characters without undermining the whole coherence of the film? In other words, with both main characters now growing ever more separately, there is a real danger that the whole film would blow apart! Quinn resolves this problem by introducing a very strict parallel montage or parallel editing between Maeve and Ruth. A parallel montage is when the actions of two or more seemingly separate characters are intermediately put on the screen like different links forming the same chain. Here, the parallel montage begins with Maeve and her father at home. For the first time, her father is opening up and he and Maeve begin to talk seriously with each other. Then there is a cut, followed by Ruth also finally beginning to talk seriously and honestly with her mother. So even though both are not speaking to each other, they are both doing and feeling more or less the same thing. In this way Quinn can adequately show the hurt and distance felt by Maeve and Ruth while at the same time maintaining the overall coherence of the film.

### **QUESTIONS:**

- bv: How can you show two separate stories together in a film?**  
**av: Directly after Maeve and Brian break up, tensions between her and Ruth still remain very high. Yet, both of them start seriously talking to their presents for the first time. Why does this happen at this particular moment in the film?**

### **THE CAMERA WORK**

Unlike many teenager films today with their rapid music clips, fast cuts and moving camera, in **32A** the camera itself rarely moves. Indeed, like the music also in the film, the camera takes relatively long shots, evoking an image of relative calm. By making the camera remain largely still, Quinn cleverly enables the viewing audience to easily take on the point of view of an observer.

Quinn uses a variety of conventional camera shots in her film. While we may not register these camera shots consciously in our heads, all these shots are very well known to us. First there are the whole shots or **total shots**, which present the main characters of the specific scene from head to foot. Like in **32A**, these shots are normally done at the beginning of a film sequence in order to provide audiences with the orientation they need to follow a certain action.

There are numerous examples of these types of shots in the film. One early example is when all the four girls are just sitting around together on a street bench speculating about the bra-size of all the girls and women passing by.

The next type of camera shot often used in Quinn's **32A** is the so-called **half-shot**. These shots normally picture the main characters of a specific scene from the head to only around the waist. When using these shots, it is generally assumed that the audience already knows about the time and location of the specific action being set. Unlike the whole shot, a half-shot gets closer to the main characters and is therefore more intimate. Quinn uses the half-shot for many of the family scenes. A good example here is when Maeve goes into the kitchen to eat with the rest of the family. There's tension in the air because Maeve's parents are angry with their older son. It's a family affair - half open, half private.

Another camera shot often used by Quinn is the **close-up**. In this type of shot, the audience normally sees only the face of the main character or characters of the scene. This is a very intimate shot because the camera is very close to the characters and their action. It is therefore unsurprising that Quinn uses the close-up shot for the kissing scenes between Maeve and Brian.

By using the different camera shots, Quinn is able to establish the different levels of intensity and intimacy of each individual scene for the viewing audience. She also often employs the standard shot-counter-shot camera technique when filming characters talking to each other.

It is very interesting to note, that there are two moments in **32a**, when Quinn uses what is called the **subjective camera**. This is an approach where the camera work directly tries to visualize the inner feelings or emotional state of a character. This can be best illustrated by the two examples. The first example is early on in the film. All the four girls are just sitting around together on a street bench speculating about bra-size, when we suddenly see the local heartthrob Brian Power appear for the first time as if he were an apparition. Appearing in slow-motion with music while having that distant look and smoking that cool cigarette, he literally appears like a dream boy. The dream-like quality of this scene abruptly ends for the girls, when Ruth literally falls for Brian, but he doesn't even notice her.

The second example where subjective camera is employed deals with the moment when Maeve starts to feel ill at the club. The camera begins to shake and spin around while the music sounds become unclear, emphasizing Maeve's sense of dizziness. Her rapid dash to the ladies room is cut several times, emphasizing how agonizingly long it must feel for her before she finally reaches the basin, where she duly vomits.

#### **QUESTIONS:**

- bv: What camera shots do we know? What role does a close-up play? Watch carefully the scene, when we first see the local heartthrob Brian. If you felt ill and dizzy, how would you film that?**
- av: Is the camera work fast or slow? Is it too slow? The film is shot on real locations. Is it a realistic film? Is it shot in a realistic style?**

## **THE LANGUAGE:**

At times the Irish accent hinders comprehension. For your convenience a number of phrases used in the film are clarified:

**“Better head”**: A phrase meaning “I better head off” or I better be going. Brian uses this phrase often.

“Maeve is **“getting off”** with Brian: Another phrase meaning the two are boyfriend and girlfriend. This doesn’t mean sex necessarily.

**“You’ll get a name for yourself”**: A phrase meaning that you will be called a morally “bad girl”. Ruth harshly warns Maeve of this danger.

**“Women’s trouble”**: A euphemism for being pregnant. Maeve’s father uses this phrase towards the end of the film, when her mother has to go away for a few days.

## **32A**

**Ireland 2007, 89 minutes**

**Director: Marian Quinn**

**FSK: 6, recommended age: 9 - 14**

**English with German subtitles**

## **Main Cast:**

**Maeve Brennan  
Ruth Murray  
Orla Kennedy  
Claire Fox  
Brian Power**

**Ailish McCarthy  
Sophie Jo Wasson  
Orla Long  
Riona Smith  
Shane McDaid**

## **Music:**

**I’m A Woman  
Picture This  
PJ  
Oliver’s Army  
Love and Affection  
Boys Keep Swinging  
I Fall Apart  
Shot it Out**

## **Sung by:**

**Susan McKeown  
Blondie  
Earl Slick  
Elvis Costello  
Joan Armatrading  
David Bowie  
Rory Gallagher  
Donna Lewis**

**Author: Julian Name, 2009**