

# STUDY GUIDE FOR THE FILM **HAPPY-GO-LUCKY**

UK 2008, written and directed by Mike Leigh.

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

## **Synopsis:**

Written and directed by Mike Leigh, **Happy-Go-Lucky** is a delightful film about the day-to-day ups and downs in the life of the young 30 year old Londoner, Poppy (Sally Hawkins). Accompanied by the cheerful music of Gary Yershon, the film opens with a scene of Poppy cycling through the streets of London, waving smilingly to people we don't see to the left and right of her. It seems she is unable to keep her eyes on the road. Locking her bike up on a street corner, she discovers a small bookshop nearby. Going inside, she first looks at the book "The Road to Reality" by Roger Penrose, but quickly puts it back, saying "I don't want to go there!" Indeed, she seems happiest in the Children's Section. Persistently smiling at the bookshop attendant, she tries to engage him in conversation, but to no avail. "Having a bad day?" she finally asks him as she gravitates towards the door. "No." he answers perplexed. "Not until I showed up, eh?...Don't worry I'm going now. Have a good day. Stay happy..." she responds. Going back to her bike, she finds that it has been stolen. Surprised, she looks around, smiles and says "Oh no, I didn't even have a chance to say good-bye". Who is this strange funny person?

Then we see Poppy with four other women dancing to loud music in a crowded disco. Wobbling back to their flat in the early morning, the party continues with all of them sitting around the coffee table giggling. Here, we learn that Poppy and Zoe (Alexis Zegerman) are flat mates. Suzy is Poppy's sister, while Dawn and Alice are friends. After the last three leave, Poppy and Zoe start making strange bird costumes out of paper bags and various pieces of cardboard and cloth. After trying one on, they both go off to the pub. What strange behavior. Who can Poppy and Zoe be? This is answered in the next scene, where we see Zoe and Poppy each bringing their bird costume materials to a school: they are both primary school teachers!

The third main teacher in the film is Scott (Eddie Marsan), Poppy's driving instructor. As diametrical opposites, their relationship literally provides the film with its emotional drive. While Poppy is warm, sensitive and caring, and encourages schoolchildren to express themselves, for Scott all this is suspect. "I can't believe you're a teacher!...You have no respect for order. You're arrogant. You're disruptive and you celebrate chaos!" he infuriatingly tells Poppy on her third driving lesson. Yet, while Scott is often enraged by Poppy, he also wants to possess her. Poppy even finds out that he is stalking her. As a result, each lesson becomes increasingly charged, finally leading to a violent scene where Poppy decisively takes out the car keys, because Scott is unable to drive safely! After calming down, Poppy says "I'm sorry I upset you. I wish I could make you happy." Still tense Scott replies, "I was happy." Poppy gives back the keys to Scott, who is now sitting in the car alone. Turning to her almost pleadingly he asks, "Was that your boyfriend...before?" Poppy looks at Scott, but doesn't answer. Again enraged, he drives off, leaving her standing alone on the street.

The film ends with Poppy and Zoe rowing a boat together on a lake. There is not a traffic sign in sight! "You know, we're lucky aren't we?" Poppy asks Zoe. "Yeah...Well, you make your own luck in life. Don't you?" Zoe answers. "Some of us

do. Some of us miss the boat completely.” says Poppy. “Yeah, it’s hard work being a grown-up”, says Zoe. “Yeah, it’s a long trip” says Poppy. “Yeah, tell me when we get there”, Zoe jokingly responds. “We’ve got a hell of a way to go”, Poppy replies smilingly.

### Questions:

**bv: Why is it, we sometimes find things funny, and sometimes we don’t? What does it mean to look on the bright side of things or see the humor in things? Why is it that sometimes laughing about serious things is fun?**

**av: Would you like to have Poppy as your flat mate? Would you like to have her as a teacher? What is Poppy’s “problem”? Can Poppy sometimes be annoying?**

It is interesting to note, that the film **Happy-Go-Lucky** has a number of unusual features. Firstly, although the film is about the day-to-day ups and downs in the life of Poppy, it is not really a psychological portrait. There is no omniscient narrator or inner voice constantly telling us how Poppy feels, for example. Throughout the film we are only able to deduce what she thinks and feels by watching how she acts and reacts with others. Indeed, this is what makes the film so fascinating and engaging. Rarely does Poppy directly talk about herself. In fact, there is only one time when Poppy actually does talk about how she sees herself and her life. This is the scene towards the end of the film, when Poppy is talking to her younger pregnant sister Helen. Believing that she is not happy, Poppy responds, “I am happy. I love my life. Yeah, it’s tough at times, but that’s part of it. I’ve got a great job, brilliant kids, lovely flat. I’ve got her (Zoe) to look at. I’ve got amazing friends. I love my freedom. I’m a very lucky lady. I know that.” Ironically, this frankness is misunderstood and rebuffed by Helen, who angrily answers, “All right! There’s no need to rub it in!”

Secondly, the film presents happiness - especially for women - in a very refreshing and sensitive way. This is important, since most of the characters in the film are women. Conventionally, women are seen as being happy when they either have a guy (like in so many romantic comedies) or they have children (like in so many happy family films). Poppy has neither. That is, in **Happy-Go-Lucky** both these traditionally seen sources of happiness for women are specifically downplayed. For example, when Poppy is asked early on in the film about her love life, she humorously answers, “Not a sausage.” Indeed, even when Poppy meets the very nice social-worker Tim, his role remains very minor and open in the film. Similarly, when Poppy’s younger sister Helen, who is expecting a baby, asks Poppy, Zoe and Suzy, if they feel “breedy”, they all answer in the negative, “with all due respects!”

Thirdly, while all the women characters in **Happy-Go-Lucky** are presented in a favorable light, this is not so for the roles played by the men. Scott, for example, who is the main male protagonist in the film, is presented as being repressed, possessive and aggressive as well as a stalker who perhaps has some strange relationship with his mother. Another example early on in the film is Suzy’s terse dialogue with a guy she knows on the street which she abruptly ends with the words, “Fuck off!” Similarly, towards the end of the film we meet Helen’s husband Jamie, who is pictured as a rather weak, conformist and indecisive character. The only exception here is the social-worker Tim. Clearly, Tim and Poppy like each other very much. Yet, outside of him being unbelievably kind and caring, we know very little about him.

### Questions:

- bv:** We all know the fairytales of a woman marrying a prince and living happily ever after, with both of them eventually settling down later to have a family. But if there is no prince and having a family is not the priority, how can a woman still be happy?  
Is it sometimes hard being a primary school teacher? Is it sometimes fun?
- av:** Is Scott a bad driving instructor? Would you like to learn driving with Scott? Explain.  
Why doesn't Poppy simply change her driving instructor?  
What relationship does Poppy and Zoe have? Explain.

### The Dramatic Structure of the Film

The dramatic structure in **Happy-Go-Lucky** is deceptively simple. The film is really a series of loosely connected scenes. Each scene is carefully choreographed, showing us in meticulous detail how Poppy acts and reacts with other people. As the film progresses, the scenes accumulate, providing us with an ever wider picture of Poppy's life. It is interesting to note, that there appears to be no overriding order in the film. This, of course, reflects Poppy's rather eclectic life. Yet, too much meandering in a film may lose an audience. That is to say, a film composed merely of a series of loosely connected scenes with no clear sense of direction may appear chaotic and confusing to viewers. In short, a film that goes everywhere - goes nowhere. The film may be interesting, but it has no dynamic. As writer and film director, Mike Leigh is very aware of this potential problem. He cleverly avoids this problem by introducing a highly rhythmic tension into the film: the weekly driving lessons. By focusing the dramatic tension of the film onto the weekly encounters between Scott, the driving instructor, and Poppy, Mike Leigh literally gives the film its emotional drive.

Indeed, this is the key relationship in the film. The dramatic tension of the film is concentrated in these regular appointments between the driving instructor, Scott - who teaches - and the driving novice Poppy - who is there to learn. The driving lessons are the means by which this teacher-learner relationship is formalized. As the film progresses, however, this relationship begins to change. Each new lesson leads to increasing emotional tension. The last lesson is so highly charged it results in a short moment of violence. Here, Scott's and Poppy's roles have now become inverted. Their relationship is now reversed: the learner becomes the teacher, and the teacher becomes the learner. This is best seen in the final driving lesson towards the end of the film. No longer having the moral authority to teach, Poppy takes out the car keys and refuses to give them back to Scott, saying he is in no fit state to drive safely. Despite him reacting violently, Poppy only returns the keys to Scott after she is fully convinced he has completely calmed down and is once again able to drive safely. This is certainly a dramatic moment in the film.

Yet, how does Mike Leigh pack so much dramatic tension into these driving lesson scenes? After all, it's only two people driving in a car. There are no bombastic special effects or huge dangerous explosions. The camera is not flying through the air, hanging from a helicopter. Indeed, the camera remains fixed and decidedly distant. There are no emotional close-ups of the character's faces. Even the violent moment

in the car between Scott and Poppy is very short and de-escalates quickly. So, how is the tension made in these driving lesson scenes? The answer lies in the superb acting performances given by Sally Hawkins (Poppy) and Eddie Marsan (Scott). In fact, all the acting in the film is extremely well done. How was this accomplished?

As writer and filmmaker, Mike Leigh has developed over the years a very special way of working with actors and actresses. It is a way which is both fruitful, but very demanding. In the case of **Happy-Go-Lucky**, Mike Leigh at first began only with the vague idea of a school teacher and driving lessons. This, of course, is hardly a story. Working intensively with the actress Sally Hawkins, however, they both began to form the character of the teacher. That is, they began to compose Poppy's personality. Parallel to this, Mike Leigh also began working closely with actor Eddie Marsan, building up the character of Scott, defining his peculiar idiosyncrasies, motivation and how he sees himself. A similar process took place between Leigh and Alexis Zegerman, who played the character Zoe. In this first phase, the goal was for each individual performer is to complete and fully understand his or her character. Once this was achieved, Mike Leigh then brought the various performers together, enabling them to react to each other and improvise. In the case of Sally Hawkins and Eddie Marsan, this meant driving together in a Learner-car, with Leigh in the back seat, listening to the partly improvised dialogue. With each new rehearsal the characters in the scene would become increasingly refined and polished. Indeed, even during the actual shooting of the film, Leigh always insisted that there be a "warm up" before each take, thereby allowing the performers to incorporate their very last changes to the scene. The result is a film of tremendous acting! **Happy-Go-Lucky** is literally a character driven film.

### **Questions:**

- bv: Can you give an example of a dramatic experience you once had? What is a dramatic moment in a film? Are they important? How would you construct a dramatic moment in a film? All of us have once been scared and nervous about taking an exam. Normally we overcome our fears. So is this a drama or everyday life? Explain. Can taking driving lessons be a dramatic experience?**
- av: What is the storyline? Is it dramatic? What does it mean when we say Happy-Go-Lucky is a "character driven" film (a term often used in the film industry and by film critics)? What are the dramatic moments in the film? Why are they dramatic? Does Scott hate Poppy? Does he want her? Explain. What does Scott think about Poppy? What does Poppy think about Scott?**

### **The Camera Work**

Generally speaking, in **Happy-Go-Lucky** the camera takes on the point of view of a detached observer. This is done by using a number of camera positions. First there are the whole shots or total shots, which present the main character of the specific scene from head to toe. These shots often are used at the beginning of a film sequence in order to provide viewers with the orientation they need to follow a specific action. In this sense they function like an establishing shot, giving the audience all the information they need to follow a scene. Mike Leigh uses the total

shot in the opening scene of the film, when Poppy is cycling in London. It is also used when she discovers her bike has been stolen.

Mike Leigh also uses the total shot when Poppy goes to the primary school to teach. This establishing shot allows audiences to deduce, that Poppy as well as Zoe are teachers. To make the filming in the classroom more intimate, however, Mike Leigh uses the half-shot, which frames the character from the head down to around the waist. In these scenes we see how Poppy and Zoe lovingly interact with their pupils as they make their bird costumes out of paper. The camera remains largely still, allowing audiences to easily take on the point of view of an observer.

The most typical camera shots of the film **Happy-Go-Lucky**, however, are to be found in the driving lesson scenes, which are very carefully choreographed. Normally, Mike Leigh opens these scenes using a very short total shot as a sort of establishing shot. Many times this is simply an outside shot of the whole Learner-car on the street. Other times Mike Leigh places the camera in the back seat of the car. The camera is looking forward through the windscreen, with the heads of Poppy and Scott seen from the back. Here, we are seeing exactly what the two characters are seeing. In this way Mike Leigh wants us to feel we too are taking the driving lesson. In order to shoot the dialogue in the driving lesson scenes, Mike Leigh cleverly places four small digital cameras (often called lipstick cameras) on the dashboard of the car - two cameras on Poppy and the remaining two on Scott. A number of microphones are also installed, so that when the two protagonists move their heads, the sound level remains the same. These camera positions are rather unusual. The result is that Poppy and Scott are often shot from the shoulder upwards. Many times we see their hands and their arms as they are turning the steering-wheel. Moreover, the fact that they are actually driving down a street greatly adds to the emotional realism of the scene. The characters not only "act" like they are driving - they are driving! In short, by placing the cameras so close to the protagonists, Mike Leigh makes sure we feel as cramped and claustrophobic as Poppy does in the car, with no way out as the tensions begin to rise. This feeling of confinement further enhances our sense of drama.

It is also important to note, that the digital cameras played an important role in the development of the dialogue between Scott and Poppy. Professional digital cameras have a continual shooting time of approximately fifty minutes before needing to be reloaded. Professional 35mm film cameras, on the other hand, have a continual shooting time of only around ten minutes before having to be reloaded with a new film. Since Scott and Poppy are actually driving around in a car, this would mean having to stop the car every ten minutes in order to reload the film cameras, completely disrupting the concentration of the actress and actor, and destroying the dynamic of the scene! This is one of the main reasons why Mike Leigh chose to shoot the film with digital cameras. They had the advantage of providing the two protagonists with much more time to improvise and work out new pieces of dialogue in the car in a fully undisturbed atmosphere. This creative experimentation not only perfected their dialogue, it greatly enriched the whole film.

#### **Questions:**

**bv: Two people are driving a car. How would you film that? Where would you put the camera or cameras?**

**av: Where are the cameras positioned during the driving lessons?**

**Throughout the film, the camera rarely moves. Indeed, even during the driving lessons, the cameras remain stable vis-à-vis the protagonists. Why does Mike Leigh choose to use this largely fixed camera position throughout the film?**

## **Language**

Like the lively music from Gary Yershon, much of the dialogue in **Happy-Go-Lucky** is punctuated by highly humorous moments full of irony. This makes the film a lot of fun to watch. Scott's dialogue, on the other hand, is very serious. Indeed, it is so serious, it is also even funny. Although, unfortunately, not for Scott, which sometimes makes the scenes even more funny!

None of the three main characters in the film have strong accents. Zoe speaks quite slowly and clearly, making her probably the easiest of the three to understand. While Poppy has a slight accent, it is the quirkiness and irony of her dialogue which people may sometimes find a bit difficult to follow. Scott speaks relatively fast and his fixations with conspiracy theories are very strange indeed. If they sound bizarre to audiences, that's fine. They are supposed to sound that way!

## **HAPPY-GO-LUCKY**

**UK 2008, 118 minutes**

**Director: Mike Leigh**

**FSK: 0, recommended age: 14+**

**English with German subtitles**

### **Main Cast:**

<b>Poppy</b>	<b>Sally Hawkins</b>
<b>Scott</b>	<b>Eddie Marsan</b>
<b>Zoe</b>	<b>Alexis Zegerman</b>
<b>Tim</b>	<b>Samuel Roukin</b>

**Author: Julian Name, 2009**