



Viewing guide for *49 Up*

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49 Up- Pre-viewing guide

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1. Introduction

The documentary film *49 Up* (Apted, 2006) is an interesting look into the lives of a number of people from various backgrounds in Great Britain. Since age 7 (chronicled in the first film of the *Up* series *7 Up*), Michael Apted has returned to these same people every seven years to document their lives, from their aspirations, fears, disappointments and triumphs. Some find themselves recounting painful memories – failed relationships, unfulfilled dreams, and other regrets. Others recount the past and chuckle at their naivety and past perceptions.

It is interesting to note not only the growth and development of the subjects of the film, but also the growth of the movie series itself. At first, the *Up* series started as an exploration of the British class system. It was meant to show how children born in the lower class were doomed to live out their life in the same class, while children born in the upper class were guaranteed to live an affluent life in positions of power.

The film still makes references to the subjects' class origins and where they are at now, but the film's tone and focus has shifted somewhat. Apted now seems just as concerned about people's relationships and their effect on the lives of the film's subjects. Many people recount the pain of divorce, their new found loves and their focus on raising their children and sometimes grandchildren. Perhaps this shift came as a necessity, the focus of the documentary shifting in sync with the focus of the subjects. It's easy to imagine that in their early years the interviewees were fairly concerned with their class and income, but later in their years they focused their concerns to their family and relationships.

This film is a great insight into the human race, a microcosmic representation of real people living in this world. Many can relate to the subjects' insecurities, joys, and relationships from different periods in their lives. Adults can enjoy this film as they relate their experiences to the subjects, while teenagers can learn from the subjects as they see the consequences of previous actions on their adult life. I found myself (as a college student) enjoying the film, and at the same time examining my own aspirations.

Are my dreams realizable, or will I have to compromise like some in the movie? What effect do my actions have on the future?

2. Questions to keep in mind before watching the movie

- Imagine that somebody was to document your life every seven years, asking probing and personal questions where millions worldwide would be able to hear your answer. Would you be able to be completely honest?
- A filmmaker has to pore through hours of footage for every subject interviewed and has to make a decision on what to include in the final product, cutting out the majority of the information provided. This could lead to things being taken out of context or having only part of a story told. Is it the director's duty to check with the subject and make sure he portrayed them correctly, or should the director be allowed to make his own inferences?
- Ask yourself what your goals and aspirations are right now. How has this changed from seven years ago? Fourteen years ago? Has your priorities changed? Where do you see yourself in seven years?

3. Where to obtain copies of this film

- [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) has the film as well as a collection of the *Up* series.
- [eBay](https://www.ebay.com) has new and used copies.
- *49 Up* is also available for rent through [Netflix](https://www.netflix.com)
- Online retail stores like [Best Buy](https://www.bestbuy.com) and [Circuit City](https://www.circuitcity.com)

***49 Up*- Post-viewing guide**

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1. Overview

This guide is meant to encourage a deeper reading into *49 Up*. Included are references pertaining to different aspects to the film. Further in the guide, references about background information, documentaries, glossaries, reviews, and scholarly treatments of similar films are included. These are meant to help understand not only the concrete information presented in the film, but also understand documentaries as a whole, film terms to help others develop the language for critique, and the socio-economical context in which the subjects live in.

It is interesting to note that the original intent of the study – to follow children through their adult life as they stay within their class confines – is no longer the focus of the film. They still point out that John, Charles, and Andrew were all born into the upper class and now enjoy an upper class life. Similarly, Tony and Symon were raised in a working class neighborhood, and while they enjoy comfortable lives, would not be mistaken for upper class. The most interesting characters were Nick, who was a farmer's son and rose to become chair of electrical and computer engineering department at the University of Wisconsin, and Neil, who after dropping out of college became homeless and suffered from some sort of mental disorder but now is a district councilor in the Eden district. The focus now seems to be how people can be happy despite the class they were born into, and how relationships affect their lives. Tony never went to college, and has been a taxi driver for most of his life, but he is happy and content with his life, and has a loving family.

I hope this guide can be used by high school and college students, as they are asking questions about how their choices will shape their future. Some students don't believe that their choices have any consequence to their future, and a few subjects displayed that sentiment at age 14 and 21. However, this is a great way to show that adults have to deal with their past, sometimes in painful ways. This is a good example to show students that they should think about their future in their life choices and relationships.

So browse through the material below to gain a better understanding of the film as well as the background, using these, your own viewing impressions, and the video clip to answer the questions below. Hopefully you can understand not only the film to a greater extent, but it might cause you to reflect a bit on your on life and future.

2. Useful Resources

a. Background resources

- Murray, C. (2001). The British underclass: Ten years later. *The Public Interest*, 145, 25-37.

This article describes the growth of the underclass in Great Britain. This article suggests that family life is important for a positive environment and can help people get out of the underclass.

- Auger, R.W. (2005). The development of elementary-aged children's career aspirations and expectations. *Professional School Counseling*, 8, 322-329.

This study looks at elementary school children and asks them what careers they would like to have, just like in *7up*. It then also compares aspirations between different ages, like older children taking more "socially prestigious" jobs.

- Helen, L. and Reay, D. (2002). Carrying the beacon of excellence: social class differentiation and anxiety at a time of transition. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17, 321-336.

This article talks about education in the UK. There are different educational opportunities for different classes, like middle class children being pushed into high performance schools to have greater opportunities.

b. Resources about documentary film

- Butchart, G.C. (2006). On ethics and documentary: a real and actual truth. *Communication Theory*, 16, 427-452.

This article discusses ethics in documentary film, important because of the ethical issues brought up in the discussion questions in the pre-viewing. This makes an important distinction between morals and ethics, and talks about

- Gallagher, M. (2003). Lens on a hard body: cult documentary and class politics. *Journal of Film & Video*, 55, 30-40.

This is an interesting article about the use of documentary for political awareness, especially for class politics and marginal social groups (like possibly the lower class).

- Whiteman, D. (2004). Out of the theaters and into the streets: a coalition model of the political impact of documentary film and video. *Political Communication*, 21, 51-69.

This discusses the impact of political documentary films within public discourse. Whiteman also suggests a model for effective political documentary films, important for the political nature of *7 up*.

c. Glossaries of useful terms

- [IMDB](#) has a fairly large glossary of movie and film terms. The interface is friendly and it is easy to find terms here. Like all of IMDB, the glossary is open to editing by users.
- [Digital Exposure](#) has another large glossary. This one pertains more to film as a medium, listing film sizes and terms linking to photography as well.
- [New School](#) has a glossary that is slightly smaller than IMDB, but has terms more related to film production, mentioning equipment like apple boxes and a&b rolls. Be aware that you need to get permission from New School before you can print for handouts.

d. Reviews of *49 Up*

- [Roger Ebert](#) is a big fan of the *Up* series. He has talked to Apted, and has some interesting insight into his thought process. Ebert calls the *Up* series “one of the great imaginative leaps in film”.
- [Bruce Newman](#) also enjoyed *49 Up*. Newman discusses the effect of the series on the subjects, especially Jackie’s rant at Apted. Newman found Neil’s story to be the most interesting.
- Chicago Tribune’s [Michael Wilmington](#) calls the *Up* series “one of the great documentaries in the history of cinema”. Wilmington also claims that no single movie “more strongly awakens our common humanity or that establishes such a marvelous, tight bond with its characters”.

e. Scholarly treatments of similar films

- Jones, J. (2005). Interpreting reality: los olvidados and the documentary mode. *Journal of Film and Video*, 57, 18-32.

This article talks about the film *Los Olvidados*, a film about social outcasts and class politics. This discusses different purposes of this kind of documentary, such as parody, social satire, and other critiques of social structures.

- Bird, G.W. (1984). Contemporary family and human development materials. *Family Relations*, 33, 333-336.

This article talks about several films, including a documentary called *The Living Maya*. This documentary, like *49 Up*, explores family relationships over a period of time. Interestingly, in this film some characters do not fit in the lifestyle they are born in, much like Nick.

- Caldwell, J. (2003). Racial borderlands: suburban plantation culture and Rancho California (por favor). *Conference paper: International Communication Association*. San Diego, CA.

This paper comments on *Rancho California (por favor)*, which connects a caste system to the United States in Southern California. This is similar to the exploration of class systems in Great Britain in *49 Up*.

3. Video-clip analysis

a. Explanation and set-up

This clip is actually taken from two different parts, the first from Nick's introduction and the second from Andrew's introduction. These two encompass opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum: Nick the son of a farmer and Andrew attending a private institution.

Pay attention to their progression. Note if they appear to be happy at age 49. Also note Andrew's introduction versus Nick's. Is there a sense of class even at the age of seven in these short introductory interviews?

b. Video clip link: [Youtube](#)

c. Analysis

This clip shows an interesting span of subjects in *49 Up*. Recall that the original premise of the series was to show that class structures in Great Britain were rigid so that it would be easy to predict that lower class children would grow up to be lower class adults. This premise is proven in Andrew's clip. It is obvious as a child that he grew up in affluence and that he enjoys a very comfortable lifestyle as a lawyer. Nick on the other hand is the foil to the thesis. He started off as the son of a farmer, but was well educated and went to America to become a full professor at the University of Wisconsin.

Interesting to note is the fact that they both appear to be happy with the place they are at, and that they were happy in the place that they were. Nick would talk about his interest in physics and only hinted that he could not pursue what he wanted to do in his current situation. Andrew would talk about the newspapers that he had read and the relationships with girls at that point.

These are the two dominant themes of the film series: class structure, and relationships and happiness. Both end up happy for the most part, and are in loving relationships. The main difference between the two is the class that they were born into. The thing to note about Nick, however, is that he moved to America and was able to thus move into the upper class. It isn't clear if the move to America was what enabled him to move into the upper class, but there is a possibility that it at least made the transition easier.

4. Discussion questions

- It is obvious that Neil's story is the most dynamic one of the group. From being a smiling happy boy to a disturbed homeless man to a councilor, Neil's story is gripping and uplifting. Is there a reason why they decided to put his story last? In your opinion, is this a message of will of the human spirit, or a critique of a system that failed him?
- Who appeared to grow the most as a person between seven and 49? Who appears to be the most likable? How does this connect with Jackie's critique of APTED?
- This film started as an examination of the class structure of Great Britain by documenting various children's lives every seven years. While Great Britain has a well-defined class system, the United States has a very fluid class system. Would it be possible to do a similar film about American children? What would change?
- Many of the subjects mention the fact that the film has affected them in a many number of ways, in some ways positively and others negatively. Now that you have seen the film and the subjects' stories, should APTED consult the people he interviews on what he should include? Would we see as good of a film if he did? What are the ethical issues surrounding discussing sensitive matters on film?

5. Closing thoughts

The film *49 Up* was a highly enjoyable film to watch, as it struck a chord on many different levels. It reminded me of my childhood days of when I had a simplistic world view, and fantastic yet simple goals. It also reminded me of the apathetic teenage years and the struggle with authority and my place in society. As a college student, I can

appreciate their questions about the future and if their plans can really work out. This was common among my peers as well. The film made us feel hopeful in the fact that most if not all of the subjects led a happy adult life despite whatever obstacles they faced early on, but also slightly uneasy based on the fact that few of them actually got to do what they aspired to do.

I feel that this is a very good microscopic look into the human race. It shows us the follies and faults, along with the triumphs of the human soul. It is this reason that so many critics praise this film, saying that it touches to the very root of humanity. We all feel sorry for the pain of divorce, and we all cheer for Neil to get back on his feet. This connection that we feel with these people, whom we know little about, is what makes this such an effective documentary.

I recommend showing this to people of all ages. High school students can appreciate the evidence that their work does matter in the future, but it also shows that they have to make responsible choices. Adults can enjoy the nostalgia from the children's stories but also empathize with the trials of the subjects. *49 Up* is a great look into people within a society, and convinces us that in the end, we're going to turn out fine.

6. About the author

a. Short biography

Emmanuel Alvarez is an undergraduate student at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, majoring in Communications and Education. He hopes to get his masters degree in Education, and become a media teacher at the high school or college level. Emmanuel recently wrote a [paper](#) on using virtual worlds in high school education that has been read in many countries by numerous scholars.

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c. A note to those who wish to use this guide, or anybody who reads this

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