

American History X: Film Guide

1. In the film, Danny has a history assignment from Murray. The assignment is to be a report on a book relating to the struggle for civil rights. Danny turned in a book report on “Mein Kampf”. Murray sees this as “unacceptable” and “dangerous”. Dr. Sweeney disagrees, saying “You did this to yourself Murray; you told them they could do a paper on “anything related to the struggle for civil rights”, in plain English!” Is Sweeney’s argument justified?
2. Dr. Sweeney confronts Danny about his book report on “Mein Kampf” and brings up Derek’s release on the same morning. Danny replies, “If you brought me in here to talk about Derek you’re wasting your time, what happened to him has nothing to do with me,” to which Sweeney replies “Everything you do has something to do with Derek.” Given Sweeney’s thoughts on this, why is he so adamant that Danny’s new paper assignment be about Derek?
3. What are your views on the character of Mr Murray, the liberal teacher who believes the Vineyard boys are 'lost'? Why do you think he believes that Danny should be thrown out of school?
4. Why was the incident where Danny blew smoke in the black student’s face played in slow motion?
5. Derek’s father, who was a fireman, was shot and killed by a drug dealer while trying to extinguish a blaze in a bad neighborhood. A news crew did an interview with Derek shortly after. Derek argued that his father’s death was race related. Was Derek’s transformation into a Neo-Nazi already underway at that point, or was it his father’s murder that triggered it?
6. Several times in the movie, different characters refer to Cameron Alexander as a manipulator who preys on insecure children to bolster his ranks. Why might more insecure kids be better candidates for recruitment into such a life-altering philosophical schema?
7. In two scenes in the movie, the Swastika on Derek’s chest is covered by a hand. First, a police officer covers it coincidentally when Derek is being taken into custody, and second when Derek is back home and looking at himself in the mirror after exiting the shower. How might these events be symbolically related?
8. Cognitive dissidence is the term for something that is a discrepancy between what a person believes, knows, and values and persuasive information that calls that into question. What difference in the convictions of Derek’s race philosophy and the other skinhead’s race philosophy sparked Derek’s split with them?

Black and white versus color

Below are two statements and their explanations. Finish the paragraphs off by citing specific and developed examples and what they show.

Black and white was the main type of film that was used to help show the past and what has occurred before 'now'. All the flashbacks that give background to the present, are presented in black and white. When the film goes back to the 'now', the footage is in color.

The use of black and white also symbolises the state of mind of Derek. When he is narrow minded and most passionate about his ideology, he can only see things as right or wrong, in black or white. It is only now that he has gone through his catharsis (change) that he can truly see the world, in color.

Closing Thoughts

- What do you think this film says about racism in the United States today?
- Given recent news events is racism different today than it was thirty years ago, before the Civil Rights movement? If so, how so?
- Do you think white people have access to more power and privilege than people of color do in the United States? Why do you think that?
- What do you think of affirmative action programs and other efforts to combat institutional racism?
- What do you do when you hear racist remarks at SHS?
- What do you believe is the future of race relations during your lifetime? Why?