

Avon Scholarship Awards Essay Contest 2022

First Place Winner

Ava Schmoelzer, Stamford High – Mount Holyoke College, Class of 2026

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Why Film Matters: The Fallout

Adolescence is perhaps the most trying time in a person's life. Adolescents are stretched between two cliffs - childhood and adulthood - and are forced to both question their lives and their futures. That's why the coming-of-age film format is so pertinent, and so necessary throughout time and age: *Emma*, *Hamlet*, *Great Expectations*, and more are all examples of coming-of-age novels from centuries past. Now, coming-of-age is primarily present in film and television: internet sensation *Euphoria*, the iconic *Breakfast Club* and hilarious *Booksmart*. Film is a way to lean into common teen issues, but also to start important conversations and provide a refuge. It's meditative but also allows for an hour or two of escapism, where adolescents can put aside the stresses of their everyday life. Megan Park's 2021 debut film *The Fallout* captures a unique portrait of today's adolescents, using film as a medium to create a stirring and resonant meditation on grief and teen life in the 21st century.

The strange case of today's adolescents has further redefined coming-of-age as a genre. Teenagers and young adults now are fiery, hyper-aware, born into a world where knowledge is at everyone's fingertips and current affairs play on a constant loop. There's a unique quality in today's adolescents not present in those of decades past: the idea of *mortality*. It's hard to live in the moment when the world is constantly slipping

out from under your feet, when scientists say that global warming will be irreversible in less than 7 years, when our lives are dominated by inaction and apathy from those in power. Today's teens desire escapism, and most importantly, *human connection*, more than ever. The particular issue of gun violence and school shootings are unique to the lives of American adolescents. Movements like March For Our Lives, led by teen activists, have brought attention to an important issue that still seems to escape prevention. Growing up in Fairfield County, I was exposed to information about the Sandy Hook shooting at a young age and found that this issue seemed to persist throughout my youth.

The Fallout is centered around a school shooting, but rather than playing into the sensation and shock, it instead dissects trauma, grief, media sensationalism and the unique attitudes of today's adolescents. *The Fallout* focuses on Vada, a high school student who has a chance meeting with popular girl Mia in a bathroom. A surprise shooting forces them, and a boy named Quinton who rushes into the bathroom to hide, together. Vada is the core of the story, as is her journey of recovery, but her relationships with Quinton and Mia and the complicated nature of family are discussed.

The shooting completely changes Vada's life. Where she was once a vibrant teenager with a good relationship with her family, she becomes completely withdrawn and seeks out ways to cope with her trauma. The film chooses not to dwell on the shooter's identity or the events that happened that day: instead, the focus is on the survivors, the victims, the aftermath. In this decision, Park chooses to criticize media sensationalism and the tendency of people to focus on the gory details rather than the individuals affected. Moreover, the teenaged characters use common 2020 slang,

referencing memes, making TikToks, and sporting viral fashion trends. This helps the film to feel relatable and modern to teens like myself, while avoiding the condescending attitudes of adult filmmakers and authors.

I personally have had experiences dealing with trauma and mental illness in my personal life and in my family. Watching *The Fallout*, I was surprised and comforted to see a portrayal of recovery and grief that matched so closely the complex and oftentimes messy truth of it. Vada is allowed to be messy and complicated in her recovery. She tries drugs, therapy, and romantic relationships with both Mia and Quinton. Her trying path to recovery that still ends ambiguously speaks to the true nature of it. *The Fallout* is unique in this, as where most teen films take trauma and grief as monolithic, solvable ideas, these concepts are instead dissected in a way relatable and resonant with today's teens.

The Fallout's unique connection to modern-day adolescents and the nuanced handling of difficult topics makes it an outlier in the teen genre film. It masters the balance between escapism and reality, and makes room for complex, truthful characters in its discussion of trauma, grief, and the unique socio-political issues important to today's teens.