The Holdovers

Themes

For more materials, visit www.TSEpublications.com
For 1-to-1 English tutoring, visit www.TSEtuition.com

Isolation / Connection

- Isolation is central to the film.
- The snowy Christmas setting intensifies the sense that Hunham, Angus and Mary have been left behind while other people return to families, homes and celebrations.
- Yet physical isolation also creates the conditions for unexpected connection.
- As the characters spend more time together, they begin to recognise aspects of each other that were initially hidden by hostility, assumptions or social roles.
- Students can consider how Payne suggests that connection often depends on people becoming willing to see beyond first impressions.

Grief / Loss

- Loss shapes each of the central characters in different ways.
- Mary's grief is the most explicit and obvious, but Angus and Hunham also carry various manifestations of disappointment, rejection and emotional pain.
- The film does not present grief as something that can simply be resolved. Instead, it explores how loss continues to influence behaviour, relationships and expectations.
- Students can examine the ways Payne presents grief through dialogue, silence, performance, setting and the contrast between moments of celebration and private sadness.

Class / Privilege

- Barton Academy is an elite institution, and class is woven throughout the film through dialogue, costume, setting and colours
- The school presents itself as a place of tradition, achievement and opportunity, but the film repeatedly reveals inequalities beneath that image.
- Some characters are protected by wealth, influence or social status, while others are expected to accept consequences they did not create.
- Students can consider how Payne critiques privilege without reducing every character to a simple representative of class.

Authority / Rebellion

- Hunham initially appears to embody institutional authority, while Angus frequently resists rules and expectations, while Mary and Lydia seem to be subservient to institutional authority
- As the film progresses, the film reveals how each character challenges these hierarchies
- As students learn more about both characters, authority and rebellion become less straightforward. Hunham himself has reasons to distrust the institution he serves, while Angus's behaviour is shaped by experiences that are not immediately visible.
- This provides useful opportunities to discuss when rules protect people, when institutions fail them, and when rebellion can become a response to injustice or neglect.

Unlikely Relationships / Found family

- One of the film's most important developments is the changing relationship between Hunham, Angus and Mary.
- Their connection is not sentimental or effortless. They argue, misunderstand one another and retain significant differences.
- Yet the film gradually constructs a form of temporary family between them.
- Students can consider what makes these relationships meaningful and why Payne avoids presenting emotional connection as something neat or idealised.

Growth / Change

- The Holdovers is interested in whether people can change.
- The film does not suggest that transformation requires a complete reinvention of personality. Instead, change often occurs through small decisions, acts of empathy and moments of self-recognition.
- Students can therefore examine which characters change, how they change, and whether the film suggests that growth is permanent, partial or uncertain.