

Read texts A, B and C and do Tasks 1–5.

Reviewing *Home Alone*

TEXT A

Ask any 8-year-old what a sugarplum is and you'll get a blank stare. Kids today have tougher questions to deal with. As a little girl asks in "Home Alone," "Does Santa Claus have to go through customs?" That's the holiday spirit behind this surprisingly charming film, which may be the first Christmas black comedy for children.

Forget old-fashioned sweetness and light. Here is the story of a large suburban family that accidentally leaves its youngest child behind when it flies off to Paris for Christmas. Kevin is a wide-eyed, savvy child who responds to being the picked-on youngest of five by asking wistfully, "Why do I always get treated like scum?" One morning he wakes up alone in the slightly creepy, too-quiet house to discover his fondest wish has come true. Looking straight into the camera, he smiles and gloats, "I made my family disappear!" Kevin has the potential to be the mawkish child or the obnoxious little adult so common on screen, but he is neither. Played with great glee by Macaulay Culkin, he is a totally endearing, up-to-the-minute little boy.

Kevin's believable, smart-kid attitude is typical of the film's creators, who in the past have mined this suburban turf with mixed results. The film was written and produced by John Hughes (who made Molly Ringwald a teen-age idol in films like "16 Candles" and turned family life into a bad joke in "Uncle Buck"), and was directed by Chris Columbus ("Adventures in Baby-Sitting").

The first half of "Home Alone" is as flat and unsurprising as its cute little premise suggests. Left on his own, with the phone out of order and the neighbors away, Kevin eats junk food and accidentally sets his brother's pet spider loose -- predictable comic touches. It doesn't pay to wonder how he orders pizza without a phone. And there are lengthy, tangled scenes showing how loving parents (John Heard is Dad and Catherine O'Hara is Mom) misplace their son during a frantic race to the airport.

But in the second half, the plot becomes more outlandish, the boy a resourceful daredevil and the comedy wilder. Kevin's house is targeted by two determined but dimwitted burglars, so he sabotages the entrances, with outrageous slapstick results.

Every now and then we see his parents desperately trying to arrange a return flight. On the final leg back, Mom hitches a ride with a polka band led by John Candy, a sure sign of maternal devotion bordering on martyrdom. But Kevin is taking care of himself like a human ninja turtle, indulging in every child's fantasy of taking over the house and becoming the hero of his own adventure.

He uses gunshots on a videotape as threatening sound effects and scatters the floor with toy trucks for the robbers to trip on. He boobytraps the front stairs with ice and the back stairs with tar. As the burglars, Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern (and their stunt doubles) respond exactly like cartoons. They do not just slip on the ice, they somersault over it. When Mr. Pesci's hair gets singed off the top of his scalp, he dips his head in the snow for relief. All that's missing from these cartoon scenes are stars flashing around the crooks' dazed heads.

Even so carefree and wry a comedy needs its redeeming lesson, though. For Kevin, it comes when he runs from the robbers and hides in a church, where carolers sing and where he encounters the gruff-looking old man next door -- the man seen earlier shoveling his walk and called by Kevin's older brother "The South Bend Shovel Slayer." Of course he turns out to be kinder than Santa. He and Kevin teach each other the true importance of family. Yet even this scene, the most sentimental, is not overplayed. Neither is the ending, when Kevin gets his new fondest wish -- his family reappears.

"Home Alone" does, after all, have its sweet side. But it's a side best appreciated by the kind of ultra-modern kids who might wonder about Santa's passport.

James, C. (██████, November 16). *Holiday black comedy for modern children*. The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/16/movies/review-film-holiday-black-comedy-for-modern-children.html>

Task 1 (8 points) Before reading the other reviews, please answer the following questions 1-8 below about Text A.

1. In the opening paragraph, the author
 - a. attempts to confuse and surprise the reader.

- b. poses a rhetorical question.
 - c. explores the cultural context that the film was released in.
 - d. sets the stage for a harsh and critical review of the film.
2. What can be concluded from the second paragraph?
 - a. the author approves of the way the main character is performed.
 - b. the film attempts to be a creepy horror film.
 - c. Kevin's behaviour is obnoxious for parents to watch.
 - d. The family intentionally left their son behind at home.
 3. How does the author evaluate the filmmakers' previous work?
 - a. Their films are typically bad.
 - b. They are unable to pull off anything besides comedies set in the suburbs.
 - c. John Huges and Chris Columbus have successfully collaborated in the past.
 - d. The results of their previous movies have been varied.
 4. What does the author NOT believe about the first half of the film?
 - a. It is superior to the second half of the movie.
 - b. The comedic aspects of the film are unsurprising to see.
 - c. Certain elements of the plot are implausible.
 - d. Some scenes from the film are quite long.
 5. How do the villains of the film behave?
 - a. They seem to act as if they are stunt doubles.
 - b. They portray the realistic behavior of common criminals.
 - c. They conduct their work in a competent manner.
 - d. Their behaviour is exaggerated to the point of absurdity.
 6. In the church,
 - a. Kevin hides from the old man next door.
 - b. the mood of the film becomes less comedic and more serious.
 - c. the carolers learn the true meaning of family.
 - d. Kevin is reunited with his older brother.
 7. In the final paragraph, the author
 - a. questions whether Home Alone's appeal is authentic.
 - b. classifies the movie as a modernist film.
 - c. references a moment in the film in which Santa uses his passport.
 - d. describes the possible target audience for the film.
 8. Which of the following statements would the author most likely agree with?
 - a. The film is a sobering cautionary tale for parents too busy to focus on what's most important.
 - b. Though the film has its low points, it has enough heart and laughs to be worth watching.
 - c. While kids may enjoy the non-stop antics, parents will be bored out of their minds.
 - d. Due to its emotional message and modern sensibilities, the film is essential viewing.

TEXT B

How close can a movie resemble a cartoon and still be called a movie? "Home Alone," another kiddie comedy from the slush pile of John Hughes, isn't a cartoon movie in the way that, say, "Dick Tracy" is. Its graphic style is closer to overheated sitcom than comic-book. But the ways in which its characters collide and carom off the walls are strictly funny-pages stuff. No one in this clobber-comedy movie seems to have a nervous system.

Kevin (Macauley Culkin) is the 7-year-old pipsqueak upstart accidentally left behind by his vacationing family when they jet to Paris for Christmas. With all the telephones in the area out, and the neighbors on vacation, the tiny terror is forced to fend for himself against a bumbling pair of house thieves (Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern).

The film (citywide) is one long lead-up to the final siege, as Kevin fortifies his home with an impressive array of make-shift weaponry. It's a gruesome premise, and director Chris Columbus, working from a Hughes script, plays the situation for knockabout laughs. The best parts play like a kid's primal wish-fulfillment fantasy. Alone and unsupervised, Kevin pigs out on junk food and trashy videos; when the thugs show up, he takes special pride in his own macabre ingenuity.

If the movie (rated PG-13) had stuck to its Road Runner-style shenanigans it might have been a disreputable success. Macauley Culkin has the kind of crack comic timing that's missing in many an adult

star, and, even when the script gets soppy, he doesn't turn himself into a cutesy ball of gloppy goo. He is refreshingly abrasive throughout.

But the same can't be said for the rest of the cast. As Kevin's parents, John Heard and Catherine O'Hara are sane and engaging but not quite crackpot enough for this movie's off-center universe. (Rick Moranis in "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids" was the ideal kiddie parent.) Once the family discovers they've left Kevin behind, the race to retrieve him is undercut with sentimentality; his parents realize how much they really love him, and vice versa.

Hughes always has had a sentimental side, and it's his worst side. Remember the blubbery finale to "Planes, Trains and Automobiles"? It gets even worse when Kevin persuades an old guy (Roberts Blossom) from the neighborhood to make peace with his estranged son. Kevin is too annoyingly mischievous and peculiar to be turned into Tiny Tim.

The heartfelt stuff also sabotages the knockabout antics. By introducing the "real" world of pain and loss, the filmmakers run a great risk. When the robbers stage their siege, it's difficult to suddenly suspend disbelief: The notion of an abandoned child standing up to thugs is too potentially upsetting for the slapstick treatment it receives here. It's like "Straw Dogs" redone by the Three Stooges.

There's something a mite sadistic in the way the filmmakers have engineered the final confrontation; they arrange it so that little Kevin never even thinks to ask for help. And even though Stern and Pesci have been encouraged to act like super goofs, that only drives home how avidly the filmmakers are trying to paper over the film's seamier side.

"Home Alone" delivers enough laughs that these objections may not matter (or occur) to most people. But there is a reason why this film plays better as a trailer than as a full-length film. Taken individually, out of context, its gags can be appreciated without having to fight off a lot of unsettling associations. In context, the gags leave a sour aftertaste.

Rainer, P. (■■■■, November 16). *Movie Review: Kid plays it for laughs in "home alone."* Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-■■■■-11-16-ca-4515-story.html>

TEXT C

Home Alone came about when John Hughes was making a checklist for an upcoming family trip and thought for a moment what would happen if he forgot his kids, who weren't on that list. After making some notes about what antics the child could get into, he realized that a good source of conflict and fear for a child would-be robbers. Some unwanted intruders coming into the safety of a child's home would be a pretty harrowing thing, and thus Home Alone was born. Director Chris Columbus came on board and did a quick rewrite, weaving in the emotional beats that unite Kevin and his neighbor.

Home Alone is the story of young Kevin McCallister (Macaulay Culkin), an 8-year-old who has been forgotten amongst the swarm of older siblings and now the houseguests who are all preparing for a trip to visit more family in Paris for Christmas. The night before they depart, Kevin has an outburst, pushed too far by his bullying older brother Buzz and wishes his family would disappear. A coincidental power outage makes the McCallisters and company late for their pick up to the airport the next morning, and in a rush, they forget Kevin. Kevin wakes up believing he's wished them all away and delights in his newfound freedom. But, when he discovers a duo of robbers (Joe Pesci & Daniel Stern) are planning to break into his home, things suddenly don't seem so fun. Meanwhile, Kate (Catherine O'Hara), Kevin's mom, suddenly realizes the mistake and becomes desperate to make the journey back to ensure her child is safe.

This is not a film masterpiece, but it has elements that endure thirty years later. I argue that the plot of Kevin combatting the burglars is not what makes people return to this film again and again. It was undoubtedly the picture's selling point in 1990, but there's something else more endearing here. Kevin's journey of learning to be independent and not fear things in his world is the more important thematic element. That operates alongside the arc his mother goes through on her journey back to her son.

The two of them have a very intense moment in the first act that initiating moment where Kevin argues that he hates his family and wishes they would go away forever. Kevin doesn't appreciate what he has, but neither does his mom; she's so busy with the minutiae of a big trip across the Atlantic that she forgets to check in on her kids and make sure they are okay. Kevin has genuine concerns about what is happening around him, and he's ignored or mocked. The way these two realize what they were overlooking or allowing to get inbetween them and then push past all the noise is the film's emotional core. That's what keeps people coming back.

While this is considered the start of a downturn in John Hughes's work, I don't think this is a terrible movie. It's certainly not as good as something like *Planes, Trains, & Automobiles*, but it does have its own charms. The comedy is definitely aimed at a younger audience with lots of slapstick, but there are some clever little bits and details that I think are still funny as an adult. Macaulay Culkin was a very charismatic actor when he was a little kid, and he can carry the film with help from Catherine O'Hara almost effortlessly.

There are great elements of fantasy fulfillment, with Kevin doing all the things kids wish they could do. He stays up late, eats whatever he wants, and gets to play grown-up. The antics he gets up to with the Wet Bandits are overly cartoony and are the moment where the film aggressively veers into exaggerated territory. What stood out to me so much in this viewing were the elements of family and learning to overcome fears. Old Man Marley (Roberts Blossom) is an essential piece of the story who deserved more character development than he got. The little he's in the story, he can bring out the heart at the core of everything. Unlike its cynical sequel, the first *Home Alone* movie is still a piece of holiday media that stands up to repeated viewings.

Harris, S. (████, November 24). *Movie Review – Home Alone*. PopCult Reviews.

<https://popcult.blog/████/11/24/movie-review-home-alone/>

Task 2 (6 points) Decide which text (A, B or C) each question (1-6) refers to. Write the corresponding letter (A, B or C) next to the question. You can use each letter more than once.

Which Text	Letter
1. is the most critical out of the three?	
2. was not written at the time of the film's release?	
3. suggests that the film should have avoided its emotional elements?	
4. summarizes the film's plot in the greatest depth?	
5. negatively compares this film with another from the series?	
6. positively compares the second part of the film with the first?	

Task 3 (1 point) Which sentence best summarizes the idea that can be inferred from the three texts? Circle the correct answer.

- A. *Home Alone* is a holiday classic that deserves to be watched year after year.
- B. The main character's performance is a highlight of the film.
- C. With a few modifications, *Home Alone* could have been a successful film.
- D. The film is one of the producer's least successful releases.

Task 4 (4 points) Tick (✓) four (4) conclusions that can be drawn from the three texts (A, B or C)

A	The film's humor is more successful as a shorter form of media.	
B	<i>Home Alone</i> is a masterpiece of holiday storytelling.	
C	The film is a realistic depiction of what might happen if parents are not careful.	
D	The film would have been more successful if it had stuck to just being a comedy.	
E	Despite being advertised as a kids' movie, the target audience seems to be parents.	
F	Santa Claus plays an underrated, key role in the film.	
G	The film's humorous aspects are reminiscent of old-fashioned cartoons.	
H	The main character is a bad example for children watching the film.	
I	<i>Home Alone</i> is worth watching multiple times.	

Task 5 (5 points) The extract below contains information from texts A, B and C. Complete it with an exact word or phrase (no more than three words) from the texts. Write the word or the phrase in the gap.

Home Alone is a 1990 holiday film that has divided critics since its release. The story, about a kid whose (1) _____ dream of his family disappearing comes true, has been described by the New York Times as (2) _____ due to the boy's unrealistic and over-the-top confrontations with burglars who attempt to break into his house. The Los Angeles Times pointed out how

the characters get injured so often that they all appear to lack (3) _____, concluding that the comedy works better in the context of a (4) _____ rather than as a full-length film. A retrospective review by PopCult Reviews, however, concluded that it is an example of (5) _____ that is worth watching again and again.

Teacher's Guide

These tasks were created in order to prepare students for the 12th grade exam reading tasks and also to help them better understand the structure and style of a review via close reading. The three reviews are of the film *Home Alone*, which all of your students have most likely seen.

Instead of having a separate reading fragment for the first multiple choice task, the questions have been written about the first review in order to check their understanding before reading the other two. When the students are working in class, they will all obviously be reading and working at different paces. Those who finish the first task will continue and go on to the next texts and tasks, but when you see that all of the students have finished the first part, you can have those who have already gone on to the other tasks pause and go through the answers with you to check to make sure everyone is on the right track.

NOTE: Unlike the material used in the collection based on *Dubliners*, the three movie reviews are **NOT** published with a Creative Commons license. However, since this is non-commercial educational material, the use of this in a classroom setting is covered under Sections 19.1.2 and 21.1 of Latvian copyright law.

Task 1:

1. C
2. A
3. D
4. A
5. D
6. B
7. D
8. B

Task 2:

1. B
2. C
3. B
4. A
5. C
6. A

Task 3: B — All three of the films compliment Macaulay Culkin's acting. While some of the other statements are made by some of the other

Task 4:

A - The last paragraph of the second text mentions how the humor is more effective as a trailer and not in the context of the entire film.

D - The second text criticizes the emotional aspects of the film, calling its sentimental side "the worst side."

G - All three of the reviews mention cartoons or use the word "cartoony" to describe the humor.

I - The third text concludes that, "the first Home Alone movie is still a piece of holiday media that stands up to repeated viewings."

Task 5 (5 points) The extract below contains information from texts A, B and C. Complete it with an exact word or phrase (no more than three words) from the texts. Write the word or the phrase in the gap.

Home Alone is a 1990 holiday film that has divided critics since its release. The story, about a kid whose fondest dream of his family disappearing comes true, has been described by the New York Times as outlandish due to the boy's unrealistic and over-the-top confrontations with burglars who attempt to break into his house. The Los Angeles Times pointed out how the characters get injured so often that they all appear to lack a nervous system, concluding that the comedy works better in the context of a trailer rather than as a full-length film. A retrospective review by PopCult Reviews, however, concluded that it is an example of holiday media that is worth watching again and again.