

# How does the life of sidney poitier illuminate

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In a current age when it is normal to see the big screen lit up by stars such as Denzel Washington, Halle Berry and Will Smith it is easy to forget the impact Sidney Poitier had in establishing African American cinema. Sidney Poitier became the first African American actor to win the Oscar for Best Actor in 1963 for 'Lilies in the Field'.

Poitier became the first African American to earn a star on the Hollywood "Walk of Fame", in 1967 a run of three successful and critically acclaimed films 'In the Heat of the Night' 'To Sir with Love' and 'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner' became the top box office star of the year, showing not only the huge success that could be achieved by an African American actor but also the mass appeal to audiences both white and black of the racially charged themes of the films explored in Poitier's work.

Poitier was the first black actor to be allowed a romantic relationship onscreen, the first black actor to become involved in an interracial marriage onscreen and the first black actor to be a hero for both black and white audiences. Emigrating from the Caribbean and rising from a background of poverty and juvenile delinquency Poitier established himself as a leading man in roles that refused to compromise the dignity and integrity of African Americans, leading the way for modern day African American stars.

In a career spanning four decades, including over forty starring roles and nine directorial roles, Poitier successfully and consciously broke down racial stereotypes in Hollywood in order to bring proud, defiant and powerful African American characters to the screen. Poitier's struggle to be accepted for his raw talent is one of the great African American success stories as he

became not only one of the most respected African American performers in the world but recognised as a classic Hollywood star regardless of race.

The life and career of Sidney Poitier shows the struggle of a black performer to prove himself, overcoming racial discrimination and pioneering the movement for black stars to be accepted in Hollywood but also tells the wider story of the African American battle to beat prejudice.

Poitier's success story emulates the desires of all African American's to aspire to equal opportunities at the highest levels, whilst the characters he played showed the world African American's refusal to give in to negative racial stereotyping and films he starred in expressed the racial issues faced by African Americans, enlightening the worldwide film audience.

1915's 'Birth of a Nation' directed by D. W Griffith marked the beginning of large scale American cinema, the film was seen by an estimated three million Americans becoming America's first feature length, studio produced 'blockbuster' film Despite being a marvellous technological and narrative achievement the film is loaded with horrific racial stereotyping of the very worst kind, African American's are either portrayed as sex crazed savages or mindless infantile simpletons, the roles of the more intelligent but nonetheless 'evil' black characters in the film are played by 'blackface' white actors whilst only the idiotic black roles are reserved for real African Americans.

The impact of the new medium of film was immediate, not only did 'Birth of a Nation's' glorification of the Ku Klux Klan see their membership soar to a record five million following the film's release but the racial stereotyping it  
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enforced saw the black role in Hollywood primarily restricted to 'Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks'. Southern Plantation films were well received and provided escapism from the depression, almost all these films featured Sambo and Mammy characters singing and dancing, enjoying their slavery.

This portrayal of African American's onscreen shows the desire to legitimise slavery as a practice long after its abandonment, implementing ideas that African American's were subservient and childlike and that the natural relationship between whites and blacks was master and slave. The first black performer to win a competitive Oscar Hattie McDaniel (for 'Gone with the Wind'1939) played 'maid' characters in well over fifty roles, signifying that despite talent the door was not open for black actors to escape the roles prescribed by racial assumptions, roles such as these 'reified dominant racial discourses and naturalized inequality'<sup>1</sup>.

Black performers were stuck in a position of self-degradation on screen made all the worse by the fact their work was perceived on screen by at least some audiences as a true reflection of the African American people. African American's were stuck with a popular entertainment outlet established and controlled by whites who wanted to keep black views, culture and expression as far away as possible from it.

The work available for African American's in Hollywood until the Poitier era was humiliating, forcing black artists to play the fool for the amusement of white audiences, without the power of economic backing of the large Hollywood studio system blacks were without an organ or the equality to

produce rival films leaving them segregated and submissive to however white executives wished to represent them.

Throughout African American history this has remained a problem from the days of slavery where masters controlled every aspect of slaves lives completely removing their voice and expression leaving slaves at the mercy of their white masters representations, it continued with the degrading 'coon' characters used in advertising and in Jim Crow shows, black Americans have been continually misrepresented not only for amusement but from a genuine belief and desire to popularise the myth of the inferiority of African Americans.

Popular culture representations allowed these beliefs to become ingrained in the American culture and the general view of whites of blacks this has contributed notably to the racism African Americans have had to endure. How was it then that by the 1950's film audiences were not packing in to cinemas to watch black Americans degraded but were listening to the defiant shout of Poitier's 'In the Heat of the Night' protagonist demanding respect and equality from a small minded town? 'They call me Mr Tibbs! becoming a rallying cry for the end of black repression and recognition of equality heard and supported by the entire movie audience The impact Poitier made cannot be understated, changing the African American role in film from comical sideshow to legitimate respectable heroes that audiences fell in love with. Poitier's success can be held down to striking good looks, electrifying screen presence and sublime acting skill. What allowed him to become a leading man was his appeal to both white and black filmgoers; Poitier was 'the

complete antithesis of all the black buffoons who had appeared before in American movies'.

Well-spoken, conservatively dressed, refined and dignified white audiences accepted Poitier as a symbol of the non-threatening black middle class who they might invite in for dinner. For black audiences anxious to assimilate with white society Poitier was the perfect integrationist hero, not crude, loud or funky Poitier was almost completely devoid of any 'black' characteristics or African American heritage essentially making him white in everything but the colour of his skin.

Poitier's non-threatening demeanour allowed him to become a successful leading man in an age where integration was an encouraging possibility. In stark contrast to the humiliation black American's suffered onscreen in the early parts of the 20th century, Poitier's characters were intelligent, humane and altogether dignified and unashamed of their blackness. Poitier became the filmic symbol of the Civil Rights Movement while Black people were fighting for their right to equal protection under the law and equal access to housing, employment, and dignity, Poitier's screen roles were reflective of the dream of the integration<sup>2</sup>, Poitier's career gained momentum in time with the civil rights movement, with his onscreen image and racially motivated films contributing to the struggle. Poitier frequently played doctors, lawyers and detectives who had risen to success in white dominated fields and had to deal with degrees of racism which came with the territory of being a black man in a white world.

This mirrors his own struggle to become a black star achieving equal footing with whites by playing characters that could make African American's proud rather than ashamed of their onscreen representation. What sets Poitier apart is that his characters are in fact superior to the whites he encounters during his films, Poitier frequently holds a moral high ground and is often simply above the hatred his characters encounter, after being shot in 'No Way Out' Poitier attempts to save the assailant's life, this contributes to Poitier's saintly image making Poitier a hero for all audiences.

Poitier often has a greater degree of talent in the field of his character to fellow whites in the film, for example in 'In the Heat of the Night' he is an expert in murder investigation and most of his modern methods are alien to the backward Southern police force, showing filmgoers that any idea of black inferiority was entirely unjustifiable Poitier's characters show themselves to be to be more talented, more useful and of greater intelligence than his white co-stars, Donald Bogle characterises this as the 'equal by being superior philosophy'<sup>3</sup>.

In Poitier we have a black actor portraying heroes whose characteristics force the audience to sympathise with, to love and to respect. Turning Hollywood on its head completely, Poitier's work absolutely redefined modern black cinema, although the honour of being the first black leading man probably lies with Paul Robeson Sidney Poitier was the first to bring truly strong and proud African American representations to the screen, changing the black face in film from one of subordination to one of power and morality. His Oscar success in 1963 shows that Hollywood and America at large were ready to accept black artists as equals.

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The change from the banning of African Americans from the ceremony to an African American receiving one of the top honours shows the dramatic change which can be attributed to the defiance against typecasting black roles implemented by Poitier. In the same way the negative portrayals of African Americans enforced negative stereotypes on the nation, the popular culture representations by Poitier of black men as powerful heroes, allowed America to move on to the integrationist age where liberal thinkers were ready to accept black Americans as equal citizens.

It would be unfair to say Sidney Poitier's onscreen persona was a true depiction of the realities of African American life; however Hollywood was perhaps not ready at this point to accept films featuring such complex black characters. What Poitier's 'ebony saint' or 'superman' portrayals did was enforce a positive depiction of African Americans pioneering a movement for their acceptance as equals through the model characters he played and also as actors who could be accepted as leading men, onscreen heroes and major stars.

Sidney Poitier brought African Americans to the forefront of Hollywood cinema creating a new climate which allowed black actors to become legitimate leading men, achieving a new level of equality in a white dominated world. Despite his pioneering impact a retrospective look at Poitier's career reveals an image manipulated by white executives, although it may have been a career which gave a new legitimacy to ideas of equality and white and black integration it may be considered one filled with the same damaging stereotypes of the old Hollywood.



Poitier's characters were remarkably sexless, rendering a bizarre sterility to his films. Even in the film 'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner' which explores interracial marriage as an issue only features one kiss between the starring couple and this is not explicitly revealed onscreen. The issue of a relationship between a black man and a white woman is still felt to be restricted in mainstream movies; this attitude may all be down to the negative stereotyping which emerged from 'Birth of a Nation' and suggests white America still feels threatened by 'the stereotype of black male hyper sexuality'<sup>4</sup>.

Not only was his on screen castration an issue but also his constant integrationist films began to get tiresome for the African American audience who viewed his whiter than white character depictions as unrepresentative of African Americans 'In the middle brow films of the 60s black characteristics had changed to their dialectical opposites shifting from Bogle's typology into sterile paragons of virtue complete devoid of mature characterisation or of any political or social reality'<sup>5</sup>.

Audiences found his that his actions onscreen tended to lead towards the helping of white characters or groups even to the point of servitude or sacrificing his life (such as 'Edge of the City' and 'The Defiant Ones') leading some critics to dub him a dressed up Uncle Tom 'he differed from the old servants only in that he was governed by a code of decency, duty and moral intelligence'<sup>6</sup>. Clifford Mason took a particularly harsh stance arguing in his essay 'Why does White America Love Sidney Poitier So? that Poitier is reduced to helping white characters overcome their problems and assert their innocence like 'the good nigger he is'. Whilst Poitier's roles may have <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-the-life-of-sidney-poitier-illuminate/>

taken an important step in affirming intelligence, dignity and respectfulness as qualities associated with African American screen characters the constant use of the 'model Negro' character implemented by Poitier was unable to provide interesting, realistic challenges to the social order.

The emergence of Poitier was important in eliminating the horrendous images promoted by the old Hollywood of black artists but his representations typically did not seem to have anything black about them, his characters may have been white if it were not for the key plot often revolved around overcoming racial problems, rejection of this genre of 'problem picture' led in turn to the rise of the blaxploitation genre which celebrated blackness and black culture.

Poitier's success can in many ways be seen as a form of integration a sense that it is necessary for African American's to become white in order to prove themselves worthy of equality, Poitier's status as a Caribbean immigrant to America left him without the slave and ghetto baggage that came with being an African American although to achieve the heights of fame he had to compromise his background in other ways such as his fierce fight to abandon his Bahamian accent.

Although revisionist cinematic historians see problems with Poitier's work it is important to recognise that he was the instrumental force in changing the way African Americans were represented in Hollywood. Poitier may have been in the right place at the right time, the politics of the era along with a desire to appeal to black audiences meant that an actor such a Poitier and the types of picture he starred in were desired by Hollywood.

However it was the immense talent of Poitier which gave him big breaks and allowed him to become a leading man and a large degree of personal integrity and most importantly pride which allowed him to set an example to all black actors not to humiliate themselves which in turn opened the door for African Americans to succeed in Hollywood.

Poitier revolutionised the film industry by rising to the very top of superstardom in a medium dominated on all sides by whites, showing that it would often take a remarkable individual to make the necessary impact to challenge the assumptions and attitudes of American institutions in order to allow African Americans further access, power and equality within them. Poitier achieved all this single handed being the only major black leading man in all of Hollywood throughout the fifties and sixties.

In the Hollywood of today black actors do not even necessarily play black characters, the system is open for the success of all artists, a part could be sought after by Daniel Day-Lewis and Forest Whitaker, this breaking down of the racial boundaries which divided Hollywood was massively achieved by the impact Sidney Poitier had in bringing true African American heroes to the screen, leading to a greater degree of opportunity, freedom and equality for African Americans.

Perhaps the significance of Poitier's work is highlighted all the more by the Oscar night of 2002 where not only did he pick up a lifetime achievement award but the top acting awards were awarded to Denzel Washington and Halle Berry, showing African Americans have risen to the very top of an industry which initially rejected them.