

How does the director, gary ross, convey the corruption of society in his 1998 fi...

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David and Jennifer are teenagers living in the 1990s. They are mysteriously transported back in time to the 1950s where their present culture influences the 1950s style of living. Is it for better or for worse? Gary Ross has the responsibility to make a comedy and romance, but with a serious message. His job is to challenge us through the film to consider whether society is being slowly corrupted.

' Pleasantville' is a comic fantasy, aimed at teenagers and with the appeal of a family film, which poses a serious question about American society and values. The film appears at first to be no more than a light-hearted spoof about adventures in Wonderland, Oz or Narnia, but the achievement of Gary Ross is to use the comedy as means of prompting more serious reflection about both of the worlds portrayed.

Pleasantville is a place without literature, art, religion, fire, sex, colour, toilets or healthy food and is described by the T. V Repairman as ' Paradise'. It is changed by the visit of David and Jennifer and they in turn are changed by their experience.

Pleasantville obsesses David before his arrival there, whilst Jennifer quickly labels it ' Nerdsville'. Yet he chooses to leave at the end but she remains, highlighting how manipulated they have been and how dramatically they have transformed.

Both Budd and Mary-Sue become simultaneously destructive and constructive by allowing the inhabitants of the village to explore joys such as sex, literature and mainly freedom.

The 1950s makeup, hairstyles, fashion and speech make us aware of the move of culture from the modern day where slang is firmly entrenched, fashion is more individualist and hairstyles are not as pronounced. 1990s language words and phrases such as 'cool,' 'dork' and 'trust me' replace 1950s expressions such as 'swell' and 'by gosh'. Cheeseburgers and cookies are soon swapped for pineapple kebabs and salads. The film is educational as it permits a viewer to see both cultures.

Budd/David and Mary-Sue/Jennifer are played by Toby Maguire and Reese Witherspoon who shine in their debut screen first appearances. Their performances are solid and bring strong characterisations to the roles they play. Toby Maguire quickly adapts to his by transforming from a shy and insecure David to a self-confident and leading Budd. Don Knotts gives us a different performance by leaving us in confusion about his character (the T. V repairman). Don Knotts portrays a fairy godmother or white rabbit – the means by which another world is accessed. The remote controller is similar to the rabbit-hole in 'Alice in Wonderland', the tornado in 'Wizard of Oz' or the wardrobe in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'. It is a device, which makes the journey to another world possible.

The use of camera angles throughout the film helps us to see corruption in society. For example a close-up is used to highlight the first coloured object (a red rose). This emphasises a 'sin' committed by Jennifer. Another example of camera use, in this case high-angle, shows basketball players missing their shots. It accentuates yet another corruption by Skip. The first and main visual corruption is definitely the change from black-and-white to

colour. Through sex, anger, passion, discovery and expression this corruption has happened.

'Pleasantville' draws many influences from earlier American films. It travels to a different, parallel world, as in 'The Wizard of Oz'; it takes teenage rebellion from 'Rebel without a Cause', the destruction of a fantasy world from 'Westworld' and the repression of women, programmed to behave like 1950s soap wives, from 'The Stepford Wives'. Further, it takes the repression of youthful creativity and curiosity from 'Dead Poets' Society' and a man living his entire life in a reality TV show from 'The Truman Show'. There are also references to the deep roots in Greek mythology such as the Bacchus story. If the inner spirit competes with the ordered, controlled side of human nature, it can be dangerous as well as attractive.

The ordered, controlled aspects of life in Pleasantville are evident in their music, literature and art. Johnny Mathis, Perry Como and Jack Jones comprise the approved soundtrack in Pleasantville. However the teenagers begin to play 1950s classics such as 'Take Five' by the Dave Brubeck Quartet or 'Be-Bop-A-Lula' by Buddy Holly. The film ends with Lennon and McCartney's 'Across the Universe' sung by Fiona Apple and featuring the line 'Nothing's gonna change my world'. This line is significant because it connects with how some of the people in Pleasantville feel towards changes being made in their world.

When books and literature are introduced in Pleasantville, great American classics like 'Huckleberry Finn', 'Moby Dick' and 'The Catcher in the Rye'

appear, alongside British author D H Lawrence. Yet later in another scene books are burnt, recalling the Nazi book-burning of the mid 1930s. The point I make here is that the Pleasantville authorities have repressed contentious literature and art just as the Nazis did.

Pleasantville's first image is Michelangelo's 'Adam and Eve', a possible metaphor for the whole film. In a later scene a girl is shown picking an apple from a tree and sharing it with Budd. The TV Repairman refers to this moment at the same time as telling David that he 'doesn't deserve to live in this paradise'. There are other biblical nods in the film besides Adam and Eve, including the flaming tree, bolts of lightning and a veiled reference to the Ten Commandments. Later art also includes Titian and Rembrandt as well as the great twentieth century 'Mould breakers' by Picasso. 'Mould breakers' is a label for any artist who breaks the mould by creating something new original. This point demonstrates again about new creations being introduced to the town. Some scenes are reminiscent of famous artworks for example, Monet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (the scene in the park) or Monet's *Water lilies*. The final image of graffiti epitomises the youthful rebellion.

There is also a political strand in the film. Bridie refers to '...your coloured girlfriend' and there is a shop sign stating 'No coloureds'. In the courtroom scene coloured people are sat separately in an upper gallery and a gang threatens Betty for being 'coloured'. The Mayor and his Chamber of Commerce are only a short step away from being the Ku Klux Klan. It is an educational reminder of the colour bar that existed in the deep south of

United States of America little more than 50 years ago. The ' Code of Conduct' is reminiscent of any repressive regime, banning Lovers' Lane and the library (that is, love and learning) as well as ludicrously limiting bed width to 38 inches.

The general theme of the film is personal freedom emerging from a respectable society. However the innocence gives way to unpleasant reality as it did in Adam and Eve and people must adapt to change, which is rarely comfortable. Jennifer's journey leads her away from her hedonistic life of the 1990s to the world of books in which she becomes encapsulatedly engrossed. When she refuses to see Skip, who turns up at her door at 6. 30, just as his counterpart had done in the 1990s, she has no wish to go with him. Instead she wants to revise.

As well as being watched purely for enjoyment the film is both thought-provoking and entertaining. It imparts a valuable message, that an individual can change so much in the world. It also makes us think that an alternative life may not be for the better and that consequences such as corruption emanate from it.

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