

One posh house. one
day, during the firm's



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One of the movies that have had a significant effect on my outlook towards life is the 1983 movie "Trading Places", directed by John Landis. Its main actors are Eddie Murphy acting as Billy Ray Valentine and Dan Aykroyd, starring as Louis Winthorpe III. Ralph Bellamy and Don Ameche play Randolph and Mortimer Duke, respectively. The Duke brothers run a thriving commodities brokerage firm in Philadelphia, known as Duke & Duke, which Winthorpe manages for them.

Winthorpe's fiancée, Penelope, is the grand niece of the Duke Brothers. In one of their conversations, the two wealthy brothers fail to agree on which between nature and nurture, is a stronger influence. They decide to set up a real life experiment involving a normal street-smart poor man switching places with their polished and well-educated managing director. They place a bet on the experiment and proceed to set it up. By that time, Valentine has had a run-in with the law when he accidentally runs into Winthorpe who has him arrested on suspicion of attempted robbery.

The Duke brothers pick on these two for their experiment, and systematically curls out Winthorpe from his job and social life, effectively turning him into a pauper, while on the other hand they bail out Valentine and offer him all the responsibilities and perks that Winthorpe had at their firm. After losing his job, his residence and having his bank accounts frozen, Winthorpe wanders around and befriends a prostitute named Ophelia (Jamie Lee Curtis) who takes him in on a deal that she will receive a reward when he regains his standing in society. On the other hand, Valentine takes up the new posh life pretty well and performs Winthorpe's job admirably. He takes on the high life pretty well and even begins to loath his former lifestyle when he invites a

group of merry makers who do not seem to have a respect for his new posh house. One day, during the firm's Christmas party, Valentine overhears the Duke brothers discussing the results of their seemingly successful experiment which had seen Winthorpe become a pauper complete with the attitude, while Valentine on the other hand had come off as polished as any well bred person can be. Upon realizing this was all an experiment, Valentine looks for Winthorpe and together they plan a revenge attack on the Duke brothers, which see the Dukes lose their investment in the commodities market.

Watching this movie influenced me in three major ways. It made me ask questions about the role of race and the prejudices with the attendant stereotypes that go with them. In addition, I got opportunity to reflect on the true nature of human nature. Indeed as the Duke brothers sought to clarify, are we the product of nature or nurture? The third main issue that I thought about was on wealth and morality. I asked myself whether there was any justification for the Duke brothers to engage in the highly disturbing actions they took against Winthorpe with the resultant emotional turmoil they caused Valentine. Was their immense wealth a license to do it? The choice of Eddie Murphy to play the Valentine the pauper turned prince seemed, in my view, based on racial prejudice. It is almost thirty years since the release of the film.

Yet its depiction of an African American pauper seems to be the standard image used to date in Hollywood movies. Valentine starts out in the movie as a con, pretending to be lame and riding on a makeshift wheelchair to attract the sympathies of passersby to get handouts. It appears to be a comfortable

picture of a pauper to a modern movie audience. This characterization feeds on biases and stereotypes the society holds when it comes to the matter of African Americans. I asked myself during the self-interrogation I engaged in after watching the movie, whether the movie would seem right supposing Arkroyd played Valentine while Murphy played Winthorpe's part. I thought not. It revealed to me that because of the consistent characterization of African Americans in similar roles in other motion pictures, I too had an unconscious expectation that an African American is best for Valentine's role. The second major influence the movie had on me was in the question the Duke brothers were trying to verify.

Are human beings the product of nature or nurture? The Duke brothers tried to get an answer by changing the circumstances of two grown men, who were clearly nurtured in very different environments. Valentine had a compulsion to steal which manifested when he tried to steal some of his "own" artifacts in the Dukes town house Winthorpe initially occupied after his elevation to high society. I tend to think that the experiment was not entirely successful since Valentine carried with him some of his old habits into the new life. He dressed better, lived better but still could not resist the urge to use drugs at the first opportunity they were available to him. In a twist of fate, it was at the time he went to the men's room to smoke a joint that the Duke brothers walked in and started to discuss the results of their experiment.

It seems as though what the Duke brothers did was to change the circumstances of the two men, but not really their nature. They largely remained the same on the inside. Little wonder Valentine had no qualms

setting them up, this time with a very bitter Winthorpe who was under intense agony that he had sought to kill himself. The two men never really changed on the inside, but responded to opportunities as they presented themselves. The third major effect the movie had on me was on the question of wealth and morality.

In the end, I felt that the Duke brothers deserved their losses because of the kind of agony they had caused the two men. Valentine seemed to have gained more than he lost during the switch, but it is uncertain what was to become of him after the experiment was over. On the other hand, Winthorpe was very innocent and suffered almost to death because the two rich men wanted to settle an argument. It begs the question; does wealth give anyone the right to interfere with the lives of other people without their consent? Is it okay to use other human being for sport simply because you can afford it? In the end, the Duke brothers pay dearly for this experiment because Valentine found out. It is scary to imagine that there may be real life situations where someone of wealth uses his influence to disrupt other people's lives. It is equally disturbing that they probably get away with it when their victims are not as sophisticated as Valentine and Winthorpe.

I strongly felt that at no point should I use whatever wealth at my disposal to interfere with the lives of other people. It is very intrusive and unjust. In conclusion, my experience with the movie " Trading Places" was a beneficial one since it helped me to face my prejudices and to realize that it is the prejudices that the society holds that informs aspects such as choice of characters in films. I resolved to question my prejudices and not just to accept things as presented to ensure that they do not influence my

relationships negatively. Secondly, I settled it that any man is really a product of nature and nurture. Each has a stake in him such that it is incomplete to take any one view in total disregard to the other. Finally, I concluded that wealth, no matter how immense is not a license to engage in atrocious acts that cause unwarranted disruption in the lives of others.

In fact, I now feel strongly that the only proper way to use wealth is to provide opportunities for the less endowed to improve their lot. Idle wealth can very easily result in idle pursuits.