

# The pursuit of happyness

Linguistics, English



## Film Analysis Essay Assignment

### Critical Analysis of a theme in The pursuit of Happiness

The Pursuit of Happiness was a commercially successful film whose main appeal is its 'feel-good' ending. It treads the much worn path of the rags-to-riches narrative, albeit with some variations in plot, characterization and context. This paper would argue that despite the commercial success of the film, it fails as a social instrument. In other words, if the purpose of cinema is not merely to entertain but also to educate, the Pursuit of Happiness fails on the latter count.

The main criticism is toward its core message that among the thousands of honest aspirants for the American Dream only a few lucky ones make through. The final shot of the film is not merely the triumph of its protagonist, but equally the defeat of multitudes of his brethren. The defeated cannot be said to have all been less industrious than our hero. Luck plays a major role in deciding who succeeds. One also needs to question the kind of culture in which the odds are so stacked that only one in a thousand makes it big in life. If the purpose of the film is to celebrate the glamour of the American Dream, then it fails substantially in meeting this objective.

A disappointing feature of the film is its predictable plotline. The much treaded rags to riches story genre is tried yet again in the Pursuit of Happiness. Almost from the moment that the homeless hero is introduced one has a sense of predictability of what awaits him. The already encumbered hero will be subject to further distress, before he emerges triumphant as a result of industry or ingenuity. In Chris Gardner we have all apt qualities of the disadvantaged hero – black, impoverished, married and

professionally uncertain. His wife's estrangement from him due to his financial failures adds to the melodrama. It can be claimed that director Gabriele Muccino had gone a little overboard in creating sympathy for his lead characters. It would have served the film well had the focus been more on crisp screenplay and editing.

The 'feel-good' focus on the film distorts a bitter actuality of American society. The story is based on the real life of Chris Gardner, who struggled through poverty and went on to become a successful businessman - he founded and managed his own brokerage firm in the 1990s. But the verity of Chris Gardner's story does not exclude the stark reality of homelessness in America. While Gardner was fortunate enough to escape poverty, millions of Americans are yet homeless.

There are several moments in the film that are touchy. It is as if director Gabriele Muccino is playing up to audience's emotions by circumventing their critical thought. The father-son relationship is both its strength and drawback. While there are genuine moments of love and sacrifice incurred by Chris and Christopher Gardner, they don't counteract the major deficiencies in the film. For example, one of the turning points in the fortunes of the hero is when an influential person from the business world happens to see him solving a hand-held puzzle. This freak coincidence would prove to be pivotal for the hero to breakthrough into the corporate world. But what is the message being delivered by such a narrative. Is not the director telling us that luck plays a major part for success in life? If so, how do we the audience compute this information. It seems that determinism is the dominant philosophical theme in the film, which mutes the roles of free-will and

enterprise.

On balance, not all aspects of The Pursuit of Happiness are lacking in merit.

For one, the film highlights a pressing social problem in America – homelessness. Despite being the richest country in the world, the number of citizens who don't have a home is depressingly high. Seen in this light, the film is an invocation for policymakers and social activists to make a change. There are more sociological perspectives at play here – especially that of race. Both the real life Chris Gardner and his celluloid imitator are both black Americans. It is a well acknowledged fact that racial and ethnic minorities bear the brunt of poverty and discrimination in the country. The director should be credited for implicitly projecting this chronic social issue. But at the same time, the deterministic or destiny-ridden narrative does a disservice to minorities. The latter would want to believe that they can change their fortunes through their own constructive actions and not through a government dole or society's charity.

In conclusion, The Pursuit of Happiness has more demerits than merits.

Taken purely as a product for entertainment it works very well. But in terms of the social message the film emits, there is much left to be desired.

Although the film is based on a real life story, it is a selected story and not a representative one. Such exceptional stories as that of Chris Gardner create the illusion that the American Dream is within the grasp of all. But, unfortunately, such is not the truth.