

Reaction paper to pleasantville movie review

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Pleasantville, a 1998 dramedy written and directed by Gary Ross, tells the story of two modern-day teenagers (Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon) who are sucked into the world of the fictional 1950s sitcom of the same name. While they try to make the best of their new surroundings, their own values and attitudes start to clash with the idyllic town, as they start to open up the characters' eyes to new ways of looking at the world. However, this brings them into conflict with forces that want to keep the town as safe and comfortable (and pleasant) as it always was. The film is a masterpiece, deftly commenting on the folly of 1950s McCarthy-era social values, the 'nuclear family,' racism and oppression in various ways. All of this is anchored by great performances from Maguire, Witherspoon, Jeff Daniels, William H. Macy, J. T. Walsh and Joan Allen.

One of the most intriguing things about the film is the way the changes in the town actually reflect the kinds of conflicts and anxieties that were happening in 1950s and 1960s America. Life in Pleasantville was meant to be perfection, the most pleasant and inoffensive television town ever created - everyone was white and privileged, women knew their place, men were the kings of the castle, and their children were obedient. The entrance of David and Jennifer into the world throws a wrench into that idea; when Jennifer has sex with the high school quarterback, this is an entirely new concept to the prudish residents of Pleasantville.

The use of color in the film is one great way to convey the themes; life in the town starts out black and white, just as in the television show. Soon, this black and white world starts to gain color, as certain people or objects become imbued with life and vigor - this symbolizes this stuffy, binary world

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starting to gain complexity and spontaneity, instead of the drab regularity of the world. This throws those who like things to be black and white (both in color palette and their worldviews) into a panic, leading to tremendous oppression and discrimination against 'coloreds' (making a somewhat heavy-handed yet effective commentary on racism as well). Eventually, book burnings that conjure up images of Nazi-era Germany are conducted in town, further showing the destructive nature of oppression.

The changes in Pleasantville indicate a need to change the pattern; while life is pleasant there, that is simply not enough. Mr. Johnson wants to be an artist, Betty Parker wants to find more love in her life, and so on; the introduction to a different way of living than the "ideal" of Pleasantville is both frightening and refreshing to its citizens - some people see a way out of their doldrums, others are upset that what they thought was the right way to life may not have been the only way. This is the primary message of the film: becoming trapped in one single way of living, admiring one specific model for behavior that everyone should follow since it is so perfect, literally and figuratively sucks the life and color out of existence. It is only through acknowledging our differences and embracing them that we can escape these limitations and live as we are meant to. The way this message is conveyed through the film and its images/symbols is fantastic, making it an excellent modern parable.