

Notes on the Film *Places in the Heart*

Folks:

These brief notes I have prepared for you on the film *Places in the Heart* should go some way in assisting you to both appreciate and comprehend the film better. It is important that I stress that these notes are not meant to be a substitute for seeing the film. To motivate you to concentrate your minds: test questions on the film *and* these notes will be quite detailed. **Note: the section titled glossary, below, must be read in conjunction with the main glossary, the course glossary, that I have prepared for you (available through the class home page).** Don't omit the footnotes in this document!

Director/Credits/Format of the Film

Visit the website www.imdb.com and do a search for the film to access this information. (When you bring up the relevant page for the film make sure you scroll down the entire page as well as explore some of the links on the left side of the page.)

Awards

- Nominated for an Oscar for best picture of the year.
- Won Oscars for best actress and best original screenplay.
- Designated as the Critics Pick by the reviewers of *New York Times*.

Type of Film

Hollywood style “mortgage” melodrama.

Source of Screenplay

Written by the director.

Film Structure

Intercut scenes with no flashbacks or flashforwards but has a “magical realist” type coda.

Dramatic Structure

Comprises two parallel parts: a traditional linear structure comprising the usual four elements of exposition, crisis, climax, and dénouement, and several vignettes that are not necessarily integral to the plot but help to enhance the sense of time and place of the story. At the same time, the cinematic rendition of the drama is open enough to permit several equally plausible ideological interpretations on the part of audiences (that is, the film when viewed as a “text” is polysemous.¹)

Geographic Setting

A farm town in rural Texas called Waxahachie.²

Film Theme

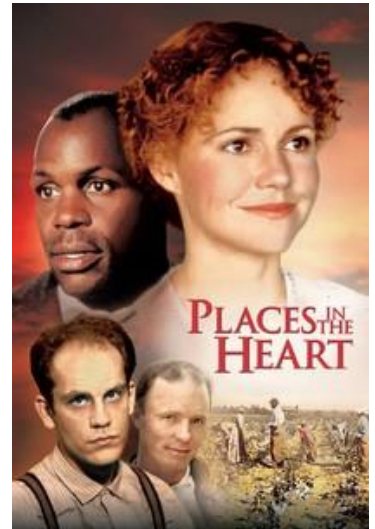
A fictionalized autobiographical paean to childhood memories of a place in the U.S. South that serves as a metaphor for the innocence, simplicity, independence, honesty, and purity of the countryside—that is rural United States—notwithstanding the myth of such a worldview (and which the film itself, perhaps inadvertently, exposes).³

Soundtrack

- Period-relevant music that includes big-band jazz (coming through a radio) and a very well-known folksong from the rural South called “Cotton-Eyed Joe.”
- Christian hymns sung in the final scene, specifically “Blessed Assurance,” and “I Come to the Garden Alone.”

Synopsis of Plot

A gentle traditionally-minded Euro-American spouse, widowed by an accidental homicide, is forced by this circumstance to immediately take on the frightening responsibility of saving the family farm from bank foreclosure (in order to save her family from destitution during the Great Depression of the 1930s).



¹ See Solomon and McMullen (1991).

² The film was actually shot in and around this town.

³ See Adams (1985) for more about this.

Synopsis of Subplot

An itinerant African American sharecropper gains temporary respite from the depression-era destitution, against the backdrop of Jim Crowism, by putting his knowledge of cotton farming at the disposal of the widow.

Synopsis of Vignettes

- Marital infidelity between a wife and husband whose spouses are also close friends.
- A blind Euro-American ex-World War I soldier providentially finds a surrogate family.
- A tornado visits the town bringing in its wake terrifying devastation.
- Murder of the African American teenager responsible for the homicide.
- The audience is shown a hint of the cowardly terrorism characteristic of the Ku Klux Klan, robed in their white bed sheets and dunce caps.
- A communion takes place in the town church featuring all the principal characters in the film.⁴

Dramatis Personae

- Edna Spalding (the spouse whose husband is killed)
- Frank Spalding (Edna's young son)
- Moze (the African American sharecropper)
- Mr. Will (the blind ex-soldier)
- Possum Spalding (Edna's young daughter)

Course Relevance

Among the several issues the film raises, *principally at the sub-textual level*, these are especially worth considering in light of the theme and purpose of this course:

- Gender and the problem of patriarchy which renders women and children vulnerable to poverty because of the absence of a male breadwinner.
- Gender and the problem of marital infidelity.
- Euro-American racism, specifically racism in the Jim Crow U.S. South as an adjunct of capitalism.
- Class warfare, specifically the problem of economic recessions/ depressions as one of the many defects of capitalism.⁵
- Class warfare, specifically the problem of unbridled greed—that is over and above that permitted by law and/or fair play in consonance with the rules of the game—as one of the many defects of capitalism.
- Class warfare and the exploitation of agricultural labor.
- Euro-American racism and historical amnesia, specifically the contravention of the “Natural Law of Prior Claim” as expressed by the dispossession of, first, the Native Americans and later the Mexicans.
- Disability as an expression of class warfare (in contrast to the contingent vagaries of life).
- Disability and the problem of *marginality*.
- The increasing frequency and intensity of weather-related disasters (in this case tornadoes) as a symptom of global warming, which itself is a symptom of rampant materialism.

Glossary

Capitalism: see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

Class: see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

Global Warming: see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

Jim Crow: see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

Magical Realism: A characteristic of a type of literature where characters/worlds of fantasy are “real” *in terms of the story*. However, in these notes I am using this term somewhat loosely to refer to a scene that is a speculative fantasy.

Marginality: see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.



⁴ The communion features a reading of the biblical passage *1 Corinthians 13*:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am become as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy and all knowledge but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and have not love, it profit me nothing. Love is patient, kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. Love never ends.

⁵ I hope you are aware that we are going through a major economic recession right now as a result of which millions have lost their jobs and hundreds of thousands their homes.

Money Shot: Short for “money-making shot” that filmmakers hope will serve as a strong audience draw and which is usually the most expensive scene to film (because it often involves stunt actors and special effects).

Natural Law of Prior Claim: see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

Patriarchy: see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

Polysemous: Something that has several meanings.

Race/Racism: see the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

Vignette: A short literary (or in this case filmic) sketch.

References/Bibliography for these Notes

Adams, William. 1985. “Country, the River, Places in the Heart.” *Antioch Review* 43 (2): 217-224.

Dempsey, Anna. “Nurturing Nature and Cinematic Experience: The American Landscape and the Rural Female Community.” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 23 (1): 115-137.

Parham, Thom. 2005. “Why do Heathens Make the Best Christian Films?” In *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film and Culture* ed. by Spencer Lewerenz and Barbara Nicolosi, pp. 53-64. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Solomon, Martha, and McMullen, Wayne J. 1991. “Places in the Heart: The Rhetorical Force of an Open Text.” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 55 (Fall): 339-353.

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