

A Film Analysis

Analyzing “Love Has to Win (2016)” as an ‘Edu-tainment’ Film
Depicting An American Girl Story: Melody 1963

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“Love Has to Win” is the filmic adaptation of an American Girl-doll story. The protagonist Melody is a precocious, young girl—growing up in a newly-desegregated Detroit, Michigan in 1963—who simply wants to understand, relate to, and feel accepted by the community and world that surrounds her. The story encapsulates innocence, imagination and the coming-of-age; it also acknowledges and pulls back the dark curtains of this time period, shedding a stifling source of light on the reality of growing up as a young, black girl during the heat of resistance to the American Civil Rights Movement. This film depicts the successes and severe shortcomings of the American dream as a microcosm of the widespread societal issues of the time.

Still, it is a story of dreams; dreams of understanding the truth about America and the acceptance of black Americans, dreams of achieving a sense of belonging and equality, and dreams for a better, safer world for an innocent, young child, regardless of racial-ethnic identity or appearance. Despite the various prejudices Melody and her family experience in the film, she is determined to see the best in everyone—from insensible peers and authoritative figures at school, to her grandfather who appears to have lost all hope for a better future—this negativity only serves as a foundation that motivates Melody’s innocently willful spirit and indomitable personality. The idea that ‘love *has* to win’ is held very deeply and very closely by Melody. Melody’s mother is a source of comfort and support to a young and impressionable Melody, confidently and persistently reminding her that “fear brings out the worst in us, but love brings out the best.”

While Melody’s educational experience and environment are accompanied by unrelenting examples of stereotypes and prejudices, this adversity establishes her mission. Inspired by the love of her family, combined with her desire to achieve her dreams and moral opposition to inequality, Melody employs her imagination and intellect to defy the societal norms that subdue her potential to pursue her dreams. This is demonstrated by many conversations between Melody and her mother in response to Melody’s many inquisitive inquiries, “Do you think black people in the

South will get the right to eat at lunch counters?” Her mother, struck by the intellectual depth of her daughter's question, answers, “They’re fighting for that right and so much more.” Melody puts on her homemade astronaut costume, replying, “Like, for the right to go to the moon if they want to?” Her mother smiles, “for the right to go as far as their dreams can take them”. Melody and her mother’s steadfast reliance on expressing and communicating love, rather than hate or fear, confirms her resilience and sense of hope.

One of Melody’s dreams is to own a television set. Like many children in the early 1960s, Melody is ecstatic about the possibility of having this novel source of entertainment in her family’s very own living room. We witness Melody’s enthusiasm as her mother discloses to her that they are “only four paychecks away” from achieving this dream. But for Melody, the excitement and dream of owning a television is soon dampened by her family’s financial struggles, but more so, by the broadcast-visualization of the brutality of racial prejudices in America. One day, Melody’s grandfather, returning from work, enters the kitchen with a handheld radio with radio-static voice reporting a gruesome response by police forces to a “peaceful [demonstration] gathering”. Melody’s mother demands that her father-in-law turn off the radio so as not to further frighten a clearly concerned and confused Melody. Her grandfather obliges, but forewarns, “I would hate for you to see what that looks like on television...but that’s the world we live in.” Melody considers this heavily...

One Sunday after church, Melody and her mother decide to go window-shopping for television sets. This shared excitement comes to an immediate halt as they approach the store, where several people are huddled around the televisions on display. Melody learns from the monotonous voice of the male, white news anchor that a church in Alabama had been bombed that morning, killing young children. Melody further learns that the attack, targeting black

Americans, occurred in the church's Sunday School, apprehensively realizing that the identity of the late victims very much resembled herself, in age and appearance.

This exposure to the world through television and, thus, news and knowledge of the larger issues of racial prejudice engages Melody with a more profound understanding of the need for equality, inclusion, and love. Melody's cognizance and corresponding realizations compel her to seek justice outside of her own circumstance. Previously, when Melody asked her teacher, Miss Abbot, why the pledge of allegiance says "'liberty and justice for all' when colored...[she pauses to correct herself] black people in the south don't have the same rights as white people", she was scolded for questioning this act of patriotism. Miss Abbot states firmly, "a true American doesn't question the pledge of allegiance... Good things come to those who wait. Remember that the next time you think about disturbing the peace of my class." On the Monday following the Sunday School bombing in Alabama, Melody refuses to recite the pledge of allegiance. After grave consideration, Melody interrupts the pledge, commanding attention. "I want to know why the pledge of allegiance is a lie." She continues, "we *are* divisible. This country divides white people and black people all the time." Miss Abbot scolds her as usual. "Young lady, you will not continue to disrupt my class." Melody persists, "Four black girls were blown up in a church in Alabama. One was as old as me and now she's dead. She's dead because no one wanted her to eat at a lunch counter!" Melody's classmate (and bully), Donald, interjects, "I don't want to eat lunch with you, either." Melody contains herself and faces Miss Abbot, "He's filled with hate. And you're not doing anything to make this country a better place for *everybody*." Miss Abbot responds, "You're behaving like a delinquent." Like many times prior, her peers are silent and attempting to demonstrate a 'mind your own business' mentality. On their way to the principal's office, Melody confesses to Miss Abbot, "Most kids come to school and think about learning. I think about how nobody wants me here." In response, Miss. Abbot explains that, as a teacher, she wants Melody to

be 'here'. But Melody's personal experiences with classmates and other teachers—the world she sees around her—justifies her concluding response to Miss Abbot, “but that doesn't make a difference”.

This film clearly illustrates and conveys the inequalities and prejudices that persist in the wake of the desegregation of schools. Melody is shown to be one of the few, if not (by the end of the film), the *only* black girl at her school. The one other young, black girl at Melody's school expresses her desire and intention to return to her old school closer to her family's neighborhood. When Melody confronts her mother about wanting to attend the school “in their neighborhood”, her mother reminds her, “there aren't even enough books to go around”. Highlighting the realities and inequalities of this time (though they persist in many places in American states today) further illustrate the gravity of the prejudices and injustices that Melody must confront with at such a young age. She wants to attend a school where she feels accepted and included, but she also understands how hard her mother worked to provide an opportunity to attend a better school even if it is farther away and causes Melody to be racially isolated in her classes.

Melody's mother empathizes with the challenges Melody faces each day and equips her with the intellectual understanding, poise, and composure to withstand the turbulent forces of prejudice. Early on in the film, her mother explains to Melody, “‘colored’ sounds like an abnormal version of white. If white is the norm, so is black. Both normal. Both equal.” Though Melody clearly recognizes that this is not the case in reality, she confidently speaks up for herself in every scenario that presents itself, as is demonstrated throughout the film. Another classmate facetiously sympathizes with Melody, “It's got to be hard feeling like you don't belong here because you're colored.” Melody responds calmly, yet with a humbled sense of pride, “Actually, I'm black. Just like you're white. And I belong everywhere you do.” These confident, yet composed responses

that evolve over the course of the film demonstrate Melody's maturity which extends far beyond-her-years.

When Melody's church plans to host a concert benefiting the victims of the Alabama Sunday School bombing, Melody strongly discourages her mother from performing in the concert. This apprehension is demonstrably out of fear of a possible attack, or simply that one concert "won't change anything". Once again, her mother reassuringly reminds Melody that fear brings out the worst, whereas "love brings out the best". Her mother also explains, "I'm choosing to show the families of the four girls love, and to give them hope for a better world... and I hope that, by helping these families in Birmingham, I can inspire others to do the same." From this, Melody begins to more comprehensively understand what it means to sacrifice one's own comfort and security for the sake of raising awareness and attention to injustice. The selfless love consistently exhibited by both Melody and her mother is finally reciprocated by the end of the film. To Melody's surprise, Miss Abbot, and nearly all of her classmates willingly chose to attend her church's concert. (However, one of Melody's bullies, Donald, refused, alluding to the prejudices that persist today.) Before going into the church together, Miss Abbot reconciles with Melody. Miss Abbot looks at Melody, hand-in-hand, "*This* is indivisible."

The film accomplishes the difficult task of authentically depicting the prejudices and adversities experienced by black Americans during this pivotal point of momentum for the Civil Rights Movement, while also producing a story that is palatable and able to be communicated to and understood by younger audiences. Overcoming this challenge is critical to the film's message and success in illustrating the everyday life of a young, black American girl whose sense of hope and security is severely threatened by society. This film depicts important aspects and events of America's modern history and probes critical questions about the impact of racial prejudice as it

existed then and as it persists to this day. Juxtaposing the innocent American Girl storyline following the character, Melody, with an authentic, yet age-appropriate illustration of the tribulations experienced by black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement empowers the robust message and purpose of this film.