

A Film Analysis

“Love Has to Win”: A Must-See ‘Edu-tainment’ Film
Highlighting the Prejudices of School Desegregation and
How Adversity Can Fuel the Desire and Demand for a Better Future

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“Love Has to Win” is the filmic adaptation of an American Girl story. The protagonist Melody is a precocious, young black girl growing up in a newly-desegregated Detroit, Michigan, 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, but it also 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 in heat of resistance to the American Civil Rights Movement. This film depicts the successes and shortcomings of the American dream as a microcosm of the larger movement, as well as the resistance, toward fairness and equality.

The film illustrates a story of dreams; dreams of understanding the truth about America and its acceptance of the black community, dreams of achieving a sense of belonging and equality, and dreams for a better, safer world for an innocent, young child, regardless of his or her racial-ethnic identity. Despite the various prejudices Melody, and her family, experience she is determined to see the best in everyone – from her insensible peers and authoritative figures at school to her grandfather who appears to have lost all hope for a better future. While other characters, such as her grandfather and her classmates, are less optimistic about the future of America and its acceptance and inclusion of black people, this negativity only serves as a foundation that motivates Melody’s willful spirit and indomitable personality. The idea that ‘love *has to win*’ is held very deeply and very closely by Melody and her mother. Melody’s mother confidently and persistently reminds Melody 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 fuels her mission. Inspired by the love of her family, her desire to achieve her dreams and driven by her moral opposition to inequality, Melody

employs her imagination and intellect in her defiance of the societal norms which repress and subdue her potential to pursue her dreams.

The steadfast reliance on expressing and communicating love, rather than hate or fear, confirms Melody's resilience and sense of hope. 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."

One of Melody's dreams is to own a television set. Like many children at her age, Melody is ecstatic about the possibility for her family to have access to such entertainment in their 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, comes into the kitchen with his handheld radio where the sound of a White man's voice is heard reporting the 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, stating, "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 White anchorman that a black church in Alabama had been bombed just that morning. Melody further learns that the attack occurred in the church's Sunday School, apprehensively realizing that the identity of the late-victims very much resembled herself, in age and color.

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 love, inclusion, and equality. 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." Once again, her peers are silent and incognizant; they are embodiments of the 'mind

your own business' mentality, disregarding the fact that fellow young peoples' lives are being sacrificed. 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 illustrate the social prejudices she feels and hardships she endures and, therefore, justify her concluding response to Miss Abbot, "but that doesn't make a difference." This scene further speaks to Melody's outspoken intellect and willingness to question authority when she feels that the authority's moral judgement is wrong and worthy of debate.

This film clearly illustrates and conveys the inequalities and prejudices that persisted 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 within her neighborhood, even though it doesn't have enough books for everyone. Later, 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 difficult realities of this time (even though they persist today) further illustrate the gravity of the prejudices and injustices that Melody is challenged by and faced 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 this opportunity to attend a better school outside of their community. Her mother empathizes with the challenges Melody must face every day and equips her with the intellectual understanding, poise, and composure to withstand the turbulent forces of prejudice she must encounter. 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 retaliative attack, or simply the notion 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 to oblige, alluding to the prejudices that still persist today.) Before going into the church together, Miss Abbot reconciles with Melody. Her porcelain white hand reaches to hold Melody’s dainty one. 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 blacks during this pivotal point in 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 girl whose sense of hope and security is severely threatened. 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 blacks during the Civil Rights Movement empowers the robust message and purpose of this film.