

PLEASANTVILLE [1998]

by

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Pleasantville. Written and directed by Gary Ross. Cinematography by John Lindley. Music by Randy Newman. Distributed by New Line Cinema, 1998.

While mother is arguing with her ex-husband, and sister Jennifer (Resse Witherspoon) prepares for a hot date, David (Toby Maguire) compulsively watches a 1950's TV sitcom called "Pleasantville," now on endless reruns, where he finds an idealized life and an escape from his contemporary problems. A magical TV repairman (Don Knotts) appears with a remote that transports them into the black-and-white TV show. TV trivia freak David easily becomes "Bud" while Jennifer has a harder time becoming "Mary Sue," the squeaky-clean children of Betty and George Parker (Joan Allen and William Macy), Pleasantville's ideal parents. While David/Bud is glad to escape modern problems, Jennifer/Mary Sue begins to rebel and infect Pleasantville with modern ideas. She transforms Lover's Lane from a place teens go to hold hands to a heaven for heavy petting (a boy has an erection for the first time). He convinces the local malt shop owner, Mr. Johnson (Jeff Daniels), to pursue a suppressed desire to paint. Soon bits of color appear in the black-and-white town, an apple, a flower, and a car. As the infection of modern emotional freedom spreads, some people become "colorized." The remaining black-and-white people treat them in a racist manner, as "coloreds." After a showdown, everyone becomes "colored." Jennifer remains while David, now with a newborn self-confidence, returns to the present to counsel his real, modern-day mother. (Rated PG-13)

Pleasantville is, by traditional Hollywood standards, a very flawed film because it does not move in a single direction from beginning to end. Yet its weakness, its non-linearity, become both its strength and its unique journey. It begins as a gentile satire poking fun at the old, idealistic TV sitcoms of the 1950s, an amalgam of "Father Knows Best," "Leave It to Beaver," "I Love Lucy," "My Three Sons," "Donna Reed," and "Ozzie and Harriet." Using an old and tired Twilight Zone trick, it becomes a sitcom itself. Yet by injecting the modern characters into the past, it only pretends to be a sitcom. After a few more excursions, it winds up a heartfelt social commentary of surprising power. Along the way, it also becomes a critique of modern aspiration, both good and bad, and the risk taking needed to achieve fulfillment.

Since the film starts out "once upon a time," we should not be surprised at the appearance of a magical figure. Rather than a fairy godmother, we have the modern incarnation – a TV repair man with a magical remote. And this "remote" does what its name promises, it transports people to another, remote time. Like many fairy tales, *Pleasantville* conveys its characters from a troubled present to an idealized alternate universe (we've seen it dozens of times, *The Wizard of Oz* being the paradigmatic version). A day at school in the present confronts David with global warming, a bleak

economic future, drugs, AIDS, and the inability to get a date. Home is equally disheartening. His escape, relatively laudably, is into the idealized world of TV (rather than into gangs or drugs). Now his escape becomes literal.

Pleasantville (which could just as well have been named Prozacville) is, basically, the living idealization of the 1950s sitcom world of conformity, mindless happiness, and false prosperity laced with fun little details from bobby sox to twin beds, to the absence of toilets (and thus a total denial not only of bodily functions, but of body itself). It's always 72 degrees and sunny. Decisions are easy, for everything is both in real and metaphoric black and white (and so are the demographics – white, that is). The sole function of the fire department is to rescue cats; breakfasts run about 10,000 calories and are drenched in fat; the basketball team never misses a shot. No sex exists beyond holding hands – and only after being pinned. It is a place where parents, for instance, never have sex. And since there are no toilets, there is no toilet talk.

David and Jennifer each react differently to their new environment. Jennifer's up-to-date modernisms turn the town upside down while David does his best to minimize the damage she actively promotes in an attempt to preserve the simple world he longs for. Both find out they are misdirected in their attempts. Jennifer finds that the library, books and the life of the mind are a wonderful counterbalance to an active physical life. David finds that safely running away from the world leads nowhere while risking the unknown leads to emotional growth. The way David and Jennifer's transitions are worked out are both fun and interesting. In both characters, growth is marked by the appearance of color in a black-and-white world. At first it appears in their environment, then in the people around them, and finally, after an emotional struggle, in them.

There are some rather obvious Biblical references in *Pleasantville*. David's girlfriend, for instance, gives him a bright red apple during one of their visits to lover's lane. However, even this fails to bring him from the world of black-and-white into the world of color. The film makes an important point here, even if it is made in a backhanded way. The transition from the idealized world of black-and-white into the more realistic world of color is *not* a fall from paradise by means of knowledge. Both worlds, according to the film, are troubled, while at the same time holding values of importance. Recognizing and perhaps accepting original sin is not, according to *Pleasantville*, an easy way toward emotional growth.

Pleasantville also contains one of the rudest dirty jokes ever put on film; however, it is several steps removed from the film's text and is thus quite well hidden. Yet all the Biblical references in the film make it easy to find. Betty masturbates and for the first time achieves orgasm. Outside of her home, at the moment of her orgasm, a black-and-white tree bursts into colored flame. This nicely echoes the explosiveness of her feelings, and the fire image works in "burning down" the old ethics which prevented women from enjoying sexual pleasure. So much for the text. If we put a slight "Biblical" twist on the burning tree, as I believe we are invited to do, we easily translate the burning tree into a burning bush. And thus, a rude pun, bush being slang for a woman's pubic hair.

Intelligently, it is not any single thing David and Jennifer do or experience that changes them from black-and-white into color. At first it appears to be simple sexual arousal. Jennifer turns on her boyfriend and he sees a red rose – the first colored object in the film. The rose being a common labial symbol, this makes sense. But the film doesn't leave it there. Jennifer is untransformed until she reaches a balance by visiting the library and becoming fascinated with books. Or perhaps it is not a balance, just two forms of the same sensuality, one of body, one of mind.

David is the last of the inner circle to turn. It is not sex or even passion that causes the change, but a recovery (discovery?) of inner values. When David defends his TV-land mother from a racist mob, he not only draws colored blood from a black-and-white thug, but he suddenly changes to color as well.

In the process of discovering their own values, David and Jennifer change those around them. Mr. Johnson, the owner of the soda fountain, is typical. When David shows him a book from the library (which were all blank until people started thinking about them, in one of the film's most delightful metaphoric messages), he is bowled over by the beauty of Monet and Picasso. He begins expressing his previously repressed urge to paint – and he soon joins his paintings in full color.

Betty, the idealized black-and-white mother, has more difficulties. In a replay of the history of the feminist movement, Jennifer teaches her mother about sex and masturbation. Thus, controlling and liberating her body, she becomes fully colored (fully alive). But she feels torn by her commitments to her husband and the town's way of life. She hides under a layer of gray make-up (touchingly assisted by her son). Eventually, however, she comes out, resulting in a disastrous rift in the family which, again very intelligently, is not resolved.

Mayor Bob is a fascinating, and brave, example of the greatest problem facing us all – fear of change. He becomes the leader of the remaining black-and-white populace bent on preserving the old ways. The black-and-whites start calling the coloreds, “Colored,” with all its racial implications. (There is a courtroom scene straight out of *To Kill a Mockingbird* [1962], with the “coloreds” in the balcony and the (black-and-) whites on the floor – again, with all the racial implications you can imagine.) Of course, the irony the film points out is that those often called “colored” are “black,” and those doing the calling, in Pleasantville at least, are black-and white. In the most frightening moments in the film, their movement takes on Nazi proportions in destruction of “decadent” art and book-burning. Some of the images seem lifted from 1936 Berlin newsreels. Just under the surface, Pleasantville is not so pleasant.

Mayor Bob gains his colors when he expresses, out loud, what he would like to do to the rebels disturbing his finely honed routine. Bob's destruction of the status quo by admitting his feelings is the key to his entry into the modern world. The film thus supports passion and an inner life, no matter whether positive or negative in the greater scheme of things, as the proper path.

Pleasantville is a fascinating and intelligent commentary on the complexities and problems of modern life. It never takes the easy way out either by denying present problems or naively idealizing the past. It reexamines what we have come to call Traditional Family Values and finds them full of anxiety and xenophobia. The people are pleasant because they have never done anything, thought anything, or been challenged by anything. Change is risk. Fear of freedom is the road to fascism. The greatest fear is thinking and acting for oneself. In "Escape from Freedom," psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wisely observes that there is nothing people fear more than the shedding of their own shackles.

Yet there is no idealized solution. As Jennifer herself says, she tried the "slut thing" and now prefers reading books. Yet she cannot return to the present; this is perhaps the film's most scathing commentary: there is no place in our world for an intelligent, balanced, yet emotionally free woman.

It is passion and curiosity that are the sins that expel these human simulacra from their black-and-white paradise into the risk, the rage, the joy, and the doubt of being fully human. The film seems to endorse modern ideas in a retro-physical universe and old-fashion ideas in a modern physical reality. The old days weren't perfect, *Pleasantville* is saying, and today isn't so bad either. We have more problems today, but also more solutions. Despite today's problems, it is today's world that is to be preferred – there's no place like home. *Pleasantville* is a smart film masquerading as a dumb one – and this is far more pleasant than most films . . . which are just the opposite.

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