



Cinema and Its Depiction of Cultural Aspects of Death and Dying

By Steven Grzeskowiak, MA

Hollywood, particularly in the “Golden Age,” depicted death and dying as simultaneously tragic and valiant, exemplified by Bette Davis’s character in *Dark Victory* (1939), Olivia DeHavilland’s in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), Ronald Reagan’s in *Knutie Rockne, All American* (1940), and Gary Cooper’s in *Pride of the Yankees* (1942). Along with being romanticized, the topic of death and dying, whether central or pertinent, was delineated basically along “mainstream” American culture — that is, through a Euro-American, heterosexual male, and largely Protestant viewpoint. Despite a significant percentage of Hollywood producers, writers, directors and moguls being both Jewish and Catholic, these filmmakers wanted their work to reflect what *they* considered the American cultural norm.

This is not to imply that all films, even major (“blockbuster”) ones solely fit that mode. Notable “Catholic” films, such as *The Song of Bernadette* (1943) and *Going My Way* (1944) swept the box-offices and the Academy Awards. And although Hollywood often continued to depict racial and ethnic stereotypes, it would deal with controversial subjects, even if at that time in a more “tame” manner. Anti-Semitism was explored in *Gentlemen’s Agreement* (1947); racism in *Imitation of Life* (1934; remade 1959) and *Pinky* (1949). These motion pictures, and others in the same genre, were daring for the time in which they were produced and released.

But has the film industry accurately depicted cultural nuances about death and dying? Specific documentaries have successfully broached the topic, including *Common Threads* (1989), *Grave Words* (1996), and *Mortal Coil: Voices from the Hospice* (1997). It is far more difficult to ascertain which dramatic movies have been as effective in their portrayal. Several films, which focus on diverse understandings of end-of-life, are notable. *The Green Mile* (1999) concerns an unjustly-condemned deathrow African-American inmate who exhibits supernatural abilities, utilizing them to bring life and hope to those around him. His unique, racial view of life (and death) is central to the plot, expanding on the

themes of faith, love, power, human worth and death. *The Syringa Tree* (2002), an adaptation of the play, tells the stories of twentyeight characters, both white and black, who primarily live in South Africa.

Although a myriad of issues are envisioned, the tragedy of death and its impact cuts across the multicultural portrayals. Director Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952) gives a unique Japanese perspective on death and dying in his rich and empathetic film about an older government bureaucrat suffering from terminal cancer who reflects on his life and final days, seeking meaning to both. *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* (1990) explores the life (and death) of Norman Bethune, a western physician who, overwhelmed by his own political passions, works among Maoist rebels in 1930s China. His well-meaning zealousness causes him to make mistakes with those he is seeking to help, sometimes to misguided tragic ends; his own demise comes from an infected scalpel wound.

Gay themes predominate in *An Early Frost* (1985), the first television film about the AIDS epidemic. Although accurate in its portrayal of the disease, it suffers from a lack of frankness of its partnered homosexual characters, depicting them as sterile, conventional heterosexual married spouses. This flaw was not an attempt to picture a gay couple as "normal" as a straight couple, but obviously to avoid any further controversy. However, considering the era in which the picture was produced, it is a forgivable mistake. The fact that it was the first such movie to deal with the subject of AIDS and gays makes it a landmark. *Longtime Companion* (1990s) is far more honest in its depiction of the cultural uniqueness of gays facing mortality, although it is strictly from a white-only perspective.

Spirituality is explored in *Shadowlands* (1993), based upon author C.S. Lewis's recollections of his love affair with his eventual wife, Joy Gresham, who died of cancer. Her death caused him to reflect on his personal spiritual journey, based upon his own understanding of the human experience, suffering and love. Despite becoming Christian, Lewis possessed a unique interpretation of his faith that was sometimes at odds with the definitions of his religion.

Women's views are articulated in *Theory of Flight* (1998), and *My Life Without Me* (2003). In the former, the main character, suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS), seeks to cope with her impending death as an individual, acting as — and being treated as — an adult who is free to make her own decisions on how to best enjoy her life and contemplate her own end. Her desire to experience all she can inspires a man, who must as part of a community service sentence for a misdemeanor help with her care, to appreciate his own life. The latter film portrays a woman who, diagnosed with ovarian cancer and given only months, focuses on shaping the remainder of her life by not informing anyone of her impending death. Other motion pictures of note that deal with death and dying and cultural diversity include *Sophie's Choice* (1982), *The Color Purple* (1985), and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993).

Depictions of cultural accuracy have become more "sensitive" in cinema, but are still often marred by commercial factors. Culturally sensitive films need to include more accurate treatment of funeral rituals, expressions of grief that reflect the social context,

and to generally portray the occurrence of death and loss in situations that do not reflect predominant stereotypes about race, religion or ethnicity. Thus, as the motion picture industry becomes more receptive to diverse portrayals, the rendering of unique cultural perspectives of death and dying will hopefully also become truer.

About the Author

Steven Grzeskowiak has an MA degree in History as well as a strong interest in film. Currently he is working with cognitively disabled children in Two Rivers, Wisconsin.

© 2003-2007 The Association for Death Education and Counseling
All rights reserved.