

Theology and Film Faith Review on *Driving Miss Daisy*

Film Title: *Driving Miss Daisy*

Year: 1989

Director(s): Bruce Beresford

Original Release Form/Venue: Released in theatres nationwide.

Current Availability and Formats: Available in DVD format at most movie retailers.

Genre: Comedic Drama

Story Elements:

Driving Miss Daisy is a story about friendship and overcoming the barriers of prejudice. Key story elements in this film are characters and actors, story structure, and central themes.

The two primary characters in the movie are Daisy Werthan and Hoke Colburn. Miss Daisy (played by Jessica Tandy) is a strong-willed, southern Jewish woman who grew up poor but is now a wealthy widow living in Atlanta. When Miss Daisy reaches an age where she can no longer drive her own car, her son Boolie (Dan Aykroyd) hires a chauffeur for her. The chauffeur, Hoke Colburn (played by Morgan Freeman), is a patient but equally determined African-American gentleman who cares for Miss Daisy in steadfast and gracious ways. The extraordinary acting of Tandy, Freeman, and Aykroyd, combined with a great screenplay, make this an enchanting film.

The story covers two and a half decades from 1948 to 1973 and revolves around the growing relationship between Miss Daisy and Hoke. Initially Miss Daisy rejects Hoke and is suspicious of him. Over time, however, Hoke wins her over with his dedication, respect, and good graces. Miss Daisy has a sharp tongue which she is not hesitant to use to speak her mind. Although Hoke usually takes her words with a smile and patience, occasionally he responds with the truth she cannot see. By the end of the film, Miss Daisy is as dedicated to Hoke as he is to

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her. They have formed a true friendship. In fact, one of the key scenes in the film occurs right after Miss Daisy has experienced a bout of dementia; she turns to Hoke and says, “You are my best friend.” The movie ends with Hoke, now too old to drive himself, visiting Miss Daisy in her 90s in a nursing home where he feeds her Thanksgiving pie.

There are two central themes in this movie. First, the movie is about how friendship can develop over time between people from different backgrounds who share experiences and interact authentically with one other. Second, the movie is about over-coming racial prejudice. Through much of the movie, though Miss Daisy protests she is not “prejudiced,” her actions often betray her. Hoke slowly helps her discover that the prejudice she learned as a youth is an irrational barrier. Further, ironically, Miss Daisy experiences anti-semitism herself, though at the time she fails to see how much she and Hoke actually have in common as targets of prejudice. Through the development of their extraordinary friendship over twenty-five years, the racial barriers between Hoke and Miss Daisy eventually crumble and the audience is left with an image of two people utterly devoted to one another.

Film Language Elements:

The key film language elements of this movie are props, costume and makeup, and onscreen and off-screen space. The props are important for helping the audience follow changes occurring in the story and for emphasizing barriers and connections. The director creatively uses a variety of props to communicate the advance of time and help the audience recognize the year in which particular events and scenes are taking place. Examples include license plate dates, car models, and greeting cards. Props also denote barriers and connections. For example, in one scene following the death of Miss Daisy’s wonderful housekeeper Idella, Hoke and Miss Daisy fix a mid-day meal of fried chicken together. However, when it is time to eat, Miss Daisy sits

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alone in her fine dining room while Hoke eats alone in the kitchen. The separateness of the meal demonstrates the continuing barriers between them. Some time later, when Miss Daisy is alone in the dark during an ice storm, Hoke still manages to make it to her house with coffee and donuts. As he goes about making a fire, it is evident that Miss Daisy and Hoke will share their breakfast meal together and keep one another company. Thus, the contrast between these scenes helps demonstrate how the racial barriers between Miss Daisy and Hoke are coming down.

Another important film language element is costume and make-up. At the time of filming in the late 1980s, Jessica Tandy was 80 and Morgan Freeman was 52. They both had to age over several decades as the film progressed. In addition, their clothing fashions had to age across decades with them. The careful use of make-up and costume maintain the reality of the film and help the audience realize the age of the characters and the decade at any given point in the movie. Costume and make-up, combined with props, make these time transitions seamless.

Finally, the director uses onscreen and off-screen space in the film. For example, when Idella has a heart attack, the audience never sees her face--only her legs and the bowl of peas in her lap spilling to the floor. Similarly, when Miss Daisy goes to hear Dr. Martin Luther King speak at a dinner, we never see Dr. King. Instead we hear the power of his words in the contrast between Miss Daisy listening in the ballroom and Hoke listening to the radio outside in the car. Dr. King's off-screen words are some of the most significant in the film as he proclaims, "history will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but the appalling silence and indifference of the good people."

Audience/Cultural Context Elements:

Driving Miss Daisy looks back on race relations during the decades before the 1980s

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when the film was made and shows progress that Americans have made since the 1940s.

However, the film also suggests that there are barriers still to be overcome.

This film is appropriate for youth and adults. It also is appropriate for older children who can distinguish prejudicial behavior in the film and not imitate it. For some children, this could be as young as third or fourth grade. For youth who are dealing with complex issues of racial divisions in school, who have trouble understanding other people's perspectives based on their backgrounds, or who are afraid of conflict, this film can provide particularly helpful opportunities for conversation.

Theology:

The film contains some worship scenes, including Idella's funeral in a Christian church and a scene involving Miss Daisy's worship at her temple. Beyond these scenes, there is no explicit connection with religion or theology in the film. However, the over-arching themes of the movie related to friendship and breaking down racial barriers have Biblical and theological importance in our tradition which, when brought into conversation with the film, offer opportunities for exploration and discussion.

Theological Themes for Conversation:

Two theological themes seem particularly appropriate for conversation with *Driving Miss Daisy*. The first concerns breaking down the walls of prejudice. The second concerns how we work through the dividing walls of conflict.

With regard to the first theme, prejudice, our Reformed tradition has long emphasized the necessity of breaking down racial barriers that foster and maintain inequality. *Driving Miss Daisy* provides a good series of examples on how well-meaning people perpetuate these barriers by their silence and their failure to proactively overcome prejudice. A particularly good

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conversation partner for this theological conversation is the Confession of 1967. “In each time and place,” the Confession states, “there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act.” For our time the Confession explicitly recognizes that Christ, in His reconciling love,

overcomes the barriers between brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. . . . Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellowmen, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess. (Confession of 1967, 9.43-9.44)

Questions for a theological conversation on prejudice related to *Driving Miss Daisy* include the following: What assumptions did Miss Daisy make based on Hoke’s race? [*e.g.* that Hoke would steal food from her; that Hoke knew Martin Luther King, Jr. personally; that Hoke did not want to be invited in to hear and see Dr. King at the dinner; etc.] How did Miss Daisy perpetuate prejudice without even realizing she was doing it? [*e.g.* having Hoke eat in the kitchen; talking condescendingly to Hoke; telling Hoke he needed to wait until they got to Mobile to go to the bathroom] What assumptions do we make about other people based on race? How do we currently perpetuate racial barriers in society—and even in our own denomination?

A second theme for theological conversation concerns how we work through conflict as Christians. Two particular points are worth noting. First, both adults and youth can be confused by the Biblical commands to “turn the other cheek” [Matthew 5:39] and “love your enemies” [Matthew 5:44]. Statements like these can be read as legal requirements for the Christian life or instructions to avoid confrontation. At an extreme, they can lead people to think we are supposed to be doormats for Christ. However, in Jesus’ ministry recorded in the gospel narratives, Jesus was never a doormat. Rather, to both disciples and powerful members of his society, Jesus authentically spoke the truth in love. [*See* Ephesians 4:15] Although we may

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think following Christ means being non-confrontational, sometimes God calls us to stand up and authentically confront the lies that dwell in darkness--because God loves the truth. [See John 14:6] Second, we need to approach conflict recognizing that our perspective is not the only one. In fact, often conflicts arise because one or both sides of the conflict feel insecurity or vulnerability in the situation at issue. In the same way that it is necessary to have courage to speak the truth in love, we also need to consider and take into account the experiences, background, and perspectives of other people.

Driving Miss Daisy provides several examples of disputes between Hoke and Miss Daisy which illustrate the points above for working through conflict. Perhaps the best example is the drive to Mobile. After Hoke and Miss Daisy have gotten lost and are running late to Uncle Walter's birthday party, Hoke tells Miss Daisy he has to stop the car to relieve himself. Miss Daisy refuses to let him stop, and Hoke is forced to confront her. First, he must help her understand his position. He does this by reminding her that he could not go at the gas station where they stopped because there were no "colored" restrooms. He also authentically shares with Miss Daisy how it feels for him—as a grown man—to have to ask her permission to stop the car so he can relieve himself. Then, the scene reveals another side of the conflict which is previously hidden from view. When Hoke leaves the car, Miss Daisy becomes frightened and the audience immediately realizes that beneath her bluster she feels vulnerable and scared. This one scene provides evidence of the power of speaking the truth in love and also the power of recognizing vulnerability in the perspectives of each side to a conflict.

Finally, one of the beautiful things about conflict is how it also can serve to bring people closer together over time. When we avoid conflict, we miss this opportunity for growth. The final scene of *Driving Miss Daisy* shows the friendship that has developed between Miss Daisy

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and Hoke because, by the end, they have a completely authentic relationship. The barriers of race and conflict are gone, and in their genuine appreciation for one another, they share the joy of a good friend's company.

Suggested Use of Film:

This film provides excellent examples and illustrations of theological themes.

Recommended Amounts/Parts of Film to View and Way to View It:

This film can be viewed in clips or as an entire film. Some of the clips that may be particularly useful include the following: scenes concerning Miss Daisy's accusation that Hoke stole a can of salmon; the trip to Mobile, Alabama; the drive back from the bombed temple; and Hoke and Miss Daisy eating in separate rooms, followed by the day of the ice storm when Hoke shows up with donuts, and the final scene when Hoke feeds Miss Daisy her Thanksgiving pie.

Additional Remarks:

This film received Academy Awards in 1989 for best picture, best actress (Jessica Tandy), best adapted screenplay, and best make-up.