

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

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JAMES SALE

Oedipus and the Plague

The Will to Endure



King Oedipus nobly endured a horrible fate; he wandered blind and exiled, with only his daughters, here only Antigone, for comfort. "Oedipus at Colonus," 1882, by Jean-Baptiste Hugues. Museum of Grenoble.

Oedipus is one of the greatest heroes of Greek mythology—immortalized in what is generally considered the greatest of all Greek dramas, "Oedipus Rex" by Sophocles. But a moment's reflection will reveal that he is a hero unlike most of the other heroes of ancient Greece: He did not possess the strength and power of a Herakles or Theseus, or the wily warrior skills of Odysseus, or even the poetry and singing skills of Orpheus who descended more deeply into Hades even than Herakles. In what way, then, was he a hero?

Well, he was a hero in that he overcame a monster, the Sphinx, but this was not through strength or wiles: It was through insight and intelligence. By Oedipus answering the Sphinx's riddle correctly, the Sphinx despairs and kills herself. And this is worth noticing, for here is the first clue as to why Oedipus is a hero: Escaping is the very thing that he refuses to do. As we will see, Oedipus when faced with his crimes does not give up. He relentlessly seeks, and unflinchingly faces, the truth, and then he takes the consequences.

He is a hero of the human will's ability to endure, to move forward, and to persevere to the end. In this way, he is a real hero for our times, for was there ever a time when we needed such qualities more?

Today's Ills

Suicide rates are at their highest-ever levels; and numbing out—not facing reality—is evident in all the escapism, that is, addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling, and home entertainment systems by which we are encased. And if we have not subjected ourselves to suicide or escapism, we also have those extraordinary high levels of depression and despair with which so many in our society are now afflicted.

What, then, is the story of Oedipus and why is this so relevant to us? Jungian psychology takes the view, I think correctly, that what we deny inwardly eventually manifests itself outwardly. In other words, what is going on within us, internally, will eventually appear in the real world. This becomes a fate from which we cannot escape.

In the case of Oedipus, the road that leads to his fate seems terrible to contemplate. We must start with Oedipus's father, Laius, and his crime. Laius raped the king's son, a crime known in antiquity as "the crime of Laius" (hybris, or "violent outrage"). As punishment, the goddess Hera sent the monster Sphinx to the Thebans. Furthermore, Apollo warns Laius that if he fathers a son, as punishment for his crime, his own son would kill him.

Faced with this oracle, Laius ordered that his son be destroyed at birth.

Continued on Page 4

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POETRY

A THANK YOU LETTER FOR Mother's Day

JEFF MINICK

We frequently hear the saying "Politics is downstream from culture," but we should consider as well that culture is downstream from the family. The foundation stone for a healthy culture is the family, both the nuclear family and its extensions: grandparents, cousins, uncles, and aunts. If we wish to see what happens to a culture when these bonds become frayed or broken, we have only to lift our heads and look around us.

And mothers are the heart of this arrangement. (A note to Dads: We'll be coming back to you on Father's Day.) Though Anna Jarvis created Mother's Day in 1908 to pay homage to "the person who has done more for you than anyone in the world," poets and writers, sons and daughters, have long extolled mothers and motherhood. From the tributes of Marcus Aurelius to his mother to those of other historical figures like Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, children have shown a deep appreciation for maternal influences, recognizing, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Men are what their mothers made them."

The most ardent literary embrace of motherhood occurred during the Victorian period. Many of that era's poems and stories about family life were certainly more sugary than today's prose and verse, though whether that difference is good or bad is debatable. Nevertheless, if we glance back at some of those 19th-century poets, we discover a deep appreciation of motherhood.

The most ardent literary embrace of motherhood occurred during the Victorian period.

Wholehearted Love

Regarding unconditional maternal love, Rudyard Kipling wrote these verses in "Mother o' Mine":

If I were hanged on the highest hill,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!
I know whose love would follow me still,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!

If I were drowned in the deepest sea,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!
I know whose tears would come down to me,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!

If I were damned of body and soul,
I know whose prayers would make me whole,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!

Years ago, when my mom still lived, I would on occasion recite these lines to her, especially after she had rebuked me. My recitation made her laugh, but we both tacitly acknowledged the truth of these sentiments.

The Teaching Mother

Victorian writer Jane Taylor, author of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," and her sister and collaborator Ann gave us "My Mother." Here are two verses from this sweet tribute to moms:

Who ran to help me when I fell,
And would some pretty story tell,
Or kiss the place to make it well?
My Mother.
Who taught my infant lips to pray,
And love God's holy book and day,
And walk in wisdom's pleasant way,
My Mother.

Mothers still "kiss the place to make it well," and still teach their children to "walk in wisdom's way."

American writer Strickland Gillilan's "The Reading Mother" recalls his boyhood when his mother fired up his imagination with "sagas of pirates" and stories of "ancient and gallant and golden days." The poem's last stanza reads:



Self-portrait with her daughter Julie, 1789, by Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, Louvre Museum, Paris.

You may have tangible wealth untold;
Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold.
Richer than I you can never be—
I had a Mother who read to me.

Treasures Unappreciated

Our own age regrettably takes a more jaundiced view of motherhood. Some mothers regret the constrictions of having birthed children, some people look askance at large families, and some malicious souls even refer to mothers as "breeders," an obscenity which if issued in the 19th century might have brought a gentleman's walking stick crashing down upon the offender's skull.

We have retained Mother's Day with its flowers and cards, its outings and phone calls, but we often fail to recognize and honor the enormous influence of moms on our culture. That mother who teaches her children their prayers, who shares nursery rhymes and stories with her little ones, who imparts virtue and right thinking to her adolescents, who steers her teenagers through the stormy seas of high school—these women are the true caretakers of culture.

Thank You, Moms

Years ago, while teaching home-schoolers, I was attempting to inspire a class about their future when a young man asked, "Why do you care about us so much, Mr. Minick? We're not your children."

I thought a moment and then replied, "No, you're not my children. But I have grandchildren, and they're going to have to live in the world with you long after I am gone."

So thank you, Moms. Thank you for all you do. No matter who you are—stay-at-home moms, working moms, single moms—thank you for trying to raise good kids, virtuous kids, kids who find value in poetry, art, and music, and most especially, kids who will treasure liberty.

Thank you for making the world a better place for my grandchildren.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C., Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

ESSENCE
OF
CHINA

Staying Safe During a Plague

The story of Yu Gun caring for his elder brother

"Scenes from 24 Paragons of Filial Piety" by Japanese artist Kano Motonobu. Indianapolis Museum of Art.

CINDY CHAN

Amid a deadly epidemic in his hometown, when people were either abandoning their afflicted homes or desperately fleeing town to escape from infection, Yu Gun was the only one who did not follow suit. Instead, he was determined to stay behind to care for his plague-stricken elder brother.

It would be several months before the epidemic gradually began to ease. Against all odds, not only was Yu Gun spared—still safe and sound—but his brother had also miraculously recovered.

This is one among many stories of protection from disease that have played out throughout Chinese history. They are timeless stories that are worth exploring.

Yu Gun was a well-educated young man who lived in Henan Province in central China during a devastating outbreak in 275-280, over 1,700 years ago. Not only was he well-versed in the Chinese classics, but he was also highly regarded by everyone for his good character, especially his piety to his parents and siblings.

Compelled by his filial duty to his elder brother, despite the dire circumstances, Yu Gun's decision to stay behind was clear.

The illness had suddenly emerged in the Henan area during the reign of Emperor Wu in the Western Jin Dynasty. It swept through the region and escalated into an epidemic, taking the lives of numerous people. Among them were two of Yu Gun's older brothers. His second elder brother was also infected and in critical condition.

To save the rest of their children, Yu Gun's parents prepared a coffin for their ill son and made ready to take Yu Gun and his younger brothers away to safety.

But Yu Gun was unwilling to go, as his elder brother would then have no one to look after him.

'I Am Not Afraid of the Disease'

When his father and elder brother urged him to escape with the family, Yu Gun replied, "I am not afraid of the disease."

He stayed behind and tend-



ed his brother with great care. Many nights he hardly rested or slept at all. Sometimes he would look at the coffin and shed silent tears, but he never wavered in his decision to be there for his brother.

Filial devotion may well have been the essential quality that helped him stay healthy and safe.

Yu Gun cared for his brother tirelessly for over 100 days before the epidemic gradually waned, and their family and the other townspeople were able to return.

Back home, they were astonished and relieved to find that both Yu Gun and his brother were healthy and safe.

The town's elders remarked: "This lad is truly extraordinary! He was able to hold fast to duty that others could not fulfill, and do what others could not do." "Indeed, only after frigid

weather can one truly see how the pine and cypress are better than other trees at withstanding the cold. And it seems that a plague cannot infect a good person," they added.

The winter image of the pine and cypress was in reference to these two evergreens that are often paired in traditional Chinese culture to convey the idea that only through a severe and rigorous ordeal can a person's true character be seen.

Genuine Safeguard Against the Plague

The account of Yu Gun's life is documented in a collection of stories about historical figures titled "Filial Piety Biographies" contained in the "Book of Jin," an official text covering the history of the Jin Dynasty from 265 to 420.

Yu Gun's account includes several other stories in praise of his filial piety, kindness, honesty, and attention to propriety.

Filial piety is arguably the most important among the various essential moral virtues in traditional Chinese culture, as the saying "Filial piety is at the root of all goodness" shows.

Confucius very much valued family relationships because a stable and harmonious family is a basic building block of a stable and harmonious society. The Confucian ideal of a man of virtue extends from filial piety to one's parents to respect toward one's elder brother, to loyalty to one's monarch, and faithfulness and trustworthiness between male friends.

According to traditional Chinese belief, Yu Gun's filial devotion may well have been the essential quality that helped him stay healthy and safe amid the severe epidemic.

History repeatedly attests to this theme, such as conveyed in two representative passages from "Songfeng Shuoyi," or "Songfeng on Epidemic Diseases," a book by the famous Qing Dynasty doctor Liu Kui, who was also called Songfeng.

"Evil will not encroach on the good, and filial piety can deter Heaven. Such is the genuine effective safeguard against the plague," Songfeng wrote.

"One who fulfills his filial obligation to his elders—this is the reason Heaven protects such a person," Songfeng also noted.



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TRUTH and TRADITION



The infant Oedipus revived by the shepherd Phorbas, 1810s, by Antoine-Denis Chaudet. Louvre, from the Luxembourg Museum in Paris.



King Oedipus, the cause of the plague, was shunned by his people. "The Plague of Thebes: Oedipus and Antigone," 1842, by Charles François Jalabert. Marseille Museum of Fine Arts.



Oedipus answering the Sphinx's question. Painted red figure ceramic, circa 470 B.C. Gregorian Etruscan Museum of Vatican Museums.



Sophocles's play "Oedipus at Colonus" ends with the king, who having atoned for his sins, becomes a blessing to the city where he is buried. "Oedipus and Antigone" by Franz Dietrich. Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, Calif.

LITERATURE

Oedipus and the Plague

The Will to Endure

Continued from Page 1

A servant was ordered to abandon and expose the baby on Mount Cithaeron, with the child's feet being transfixed by a spike. Hence, the name Oedipus, which means "swollen feet." However, the servant couldn't go along with such an evil act, so he passes the child to a shepherd to look after, and so fate is set in motion.

Fast-forward: The oracle at Delphi tells Oedipus that he will kill his father and marry his mother; Oedipus, not knowing his true heritage, assumes he will harm his step-parents at Corinth. Thus, to avoid the prophecy, he flees Corinth and during his flight inadvertently meets his real father at a crossroad. Neither recognizes the other, and following an altercation, Oedipus kills his father.

From there, Oedipus goes on to Thebes, and on the way answers the Sphinx's riddle. Through this act of superior intelligence, he destroys the Sphinx and is made king of Corinth; in the process, he marries Queen Jocasta who, unbeknownst to them both, is also his real mother. The prophecy of Apollo is fulfilled.



"The Murder of Laius by Oedipus," 1867, by Joseph Blanc.

There are many points of deep interest in this story, but here I want to focus on the fact it all seems to our modern minds wholly unfair!

It's Unfair!

It seems as if Oedipus is some innocent being led to willful destruction for no good reason. After all, his father's actions—or to use a biblical term, sin—provoked the first curse. Then, having survived birth and exposure, his killing of Laius was in anger, but also in self-defense, as he was being forced off the road by Laius, and Laius struck him. He also had tried desperately to avoid the prophecy by not going near his home city. Finally, he could not know that Jocasta was his mother.

But here we remember James Hollis's comment: "How different was Jung's puzzling but challenging religious affirmation that especially in the traumatic, the work of the gods may be seen. He wrote, '[God] is the name by which I designate all things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or worse.'" Something, clearly, crosses Oedipus's path in its violent and reckless way.

And so we come to the middle part of the story. For Oedipus could have lived a happy-ever-after life with Queen Jocasta. He was a successful king for 20 years; they had four children between them. And they didn't know they were committing incest. But at this point in the narrative, the god Apollo forces the issue. A dreadful plague descends on Thebes, and on consulting the Delphic Oracle, Oedipus learns that the plague will only end when the murderer of King Laius has been killed or banished. Oedi-

pus (ironically, since he curses himself) puts a curse on the murderer and then sets out to find him and end the plague.

Today, we consider it heartless and wrong to suggest that COVID-19 is a plague sent by God or the gods to punish mankind for some sin that we are unaware of. But it is not just the Greeks who held that plagues are manifestations of the gods' anger. Most famously, the Bible records the Egyptians, the Israelites, the Philistines, the Assyrians, and more besides, experiencing plagues as a direct result of some transgressions. Often these are ascribed to the whole nation or tribe, but sometimes, as in the case of Oedipus, they derive from one sole person's wrongdoing. For example, in 2 Samuel 24:10 we learn of King David's sin—a sin that causes 70,000 people to die in a plague.

Oedipus is a hero of the human will's ability to endure, to move forward, and to persevere to the end.

The point about the sin, however, is that it is not obvious: It is something beneath the surface that has to be revealed through the suffering. Nobody wants it, and in one sense, nobody deserves it. How are we, as humans, to say that somebody deserves to die of COVID-19?

In his book "The Wisdom of the Myths," Luc Ferry addresses this fundamental question: Irrespective of whether we see ourselves of deserving a certain fate, we must face it. So here is where the Oedipus story reveals the

significance of these crises: The ancients did not go into denial to avoid the truth or to evade responsibility. They faced reality; in Eastern philosophical terms, the Tao is right and to go against it is the greater crime.

Plagues cannot be ignored; lives are at stake. But what they force human beings to do is ask "why?" Why this plague, and why now? And so, the rest of the story of Oedipus is his relentless pursuit to find the answer to this question. In one sense, plagues force us to confront mortality and suffering in a very direct and agonizing manner, and this leads us to question the meaning of life itself. Oedipus, then, is a model for our times.

Facing or Dodging Responsibility?

If we consider COVID-19, the modern world wants to find who is responsible for it. Is it the Chinese Communist Party? Is it some aspect of biological evolution whereby viruses naturally mutate, or have they unnaturally mutated? Is it the leader or government of this or that country who failed to put in place the right measures at the right time? Is it scientists more generally who have failed to give good advice? The list goes on. But this way of thinking is not how the Greeks or the Israelites or the ancients thought.

Once Zeus triumphed over the forces of chaos and darkness, and established order and justice (the goddess Diké)—the equivalent to God creating the cosmos and it being "good"—all violations of this order have consequences. It's not that the sons of the father must be punished for their father's sin, but rather that in sinning in the first place the cosmic order has been displaced, and so there is going to be collateral damage that may take generations to repair, and to return

to its proper and harmonious stability.

In a way, we see this all the time: Parents can create unfortunate legacies for their children, which is not the children's fault, but for which they have to endure a lifetime of problems. And if we consider the whole Oedipus family story—which extends over several generations—this is extremely apt.

Thus, while we may be looking for who is immediately responsible for COVID-19, the ancient Greeks who recorded what happened to Oedipus would be looking for something deeper: perhaps one person, one family, one tribe, or one nation that exhibited massive hubris at some point in the past, and now collectively we all have to pay the price, as Oedipus's subjects did when the plague struck them. Alternatively, has humanity itself committed some collective act of hubris for which now a penalty is being enforced?

The herdsman in Sophocles's play who finally confirms that it is Oedipus who killed his father, says as he is about to make the revelation: "I am on the brink of terrible words." To which Oedipus replies, "And I of terrible hearing." What must we in the modern world, as we contemplate the fate of Oedipus, hear that perhaps we don't want to but, like Oedipus, we must?

James Sale is an English businessman whose company, Motivational Maps Ltd., operates in 14 countries. He is the author of over 40 books on management and education from major international publishers including Macmillan, Pearson, and Routledge. As a poet, he won the first prize in The Society of Classical Poets' 2017 competition and spoke in June 2019 at the group's first symposium held at New York's Princeton Club.

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LITERATURE

‘Little Women’: A Gem of American Literature

SUSANNAH PEARCE

Louisa May Alcott’s “Little Women” (1868) holds a unique place in the literary annals. It has enjoyed popularity from the time of publication until today and has even inspired numerous interpretations for the stage and silver screen. On the other hand, it is discounted by some as juvenile and preachy—“only” a children’s book. It doesn’t get even a mention in Wikipedia’s “American Literature” entry, and is only briefly listed under its “Children’s Literature” entry.

“Little Women” also evades the canon of “The Great American Novel,” a term coined by novelist John William De Forest in his essay written the same year as “Little Women.” De Forest defined the designation as “the picture of ordinary emotions and manners of American existence.” Considering academics include on the list “Moby Dick,” which is about a revenge-crazed whaler, we can’t help wonder why “Little Women,” which portrays exactly the ordinary picture of emotions and manners found in American family life, does not!

It was publicly vindicated in the 2003 BBC survey “The Big Read,” which polled three-quarters of a million readers. “Little Women” ranked 18th in the list of the UK’s best-loved novels, coming fourth among American novels.

What makes Louisa May Alcott’s work inspire such differing responses among critics? It may be its seeming ordinariness that causes it to be overlooked by academics, yet beloved by generations of readers. Perhaps Alcott does have something truly unique to offer, which the academics have missed.

Lemonade From Lemons

Alcott’s bestseller is often described as an autobiographical work because the author lifts from her own experience much of what we see in the story: a family of four sisters living in New England, guided in their growth by loving parents. The March family has fallen into difficult financial means familiar to the Alcotts. The identities of the story’s March sisters (Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy) line up with the Alcott family (Anna, Louisa, Elizabeth, and May).

Alcott certainly based many of the events in the story on the

doings of her actual family, but her story is far from an autobiography. Doubtless, she and her sisters enjoyed putting on plays, composing newspapers, and doing general household tasks as did the March sisters of the book. However, her real childhood was not quite the cozy, rooted existence enjoyed by the March family.

While the Marches remember more prosperous circumstances, the Alcotts were sadly accustomed to humiliating poverty and even outright penury and hunger. Their family had to move time after time as Mr. Alcott experienced one failure after another. This upbringing nevertheless provided Louisa not only with material for her stories about a family living in poverty but also with an impetus for writing: making a decent living.

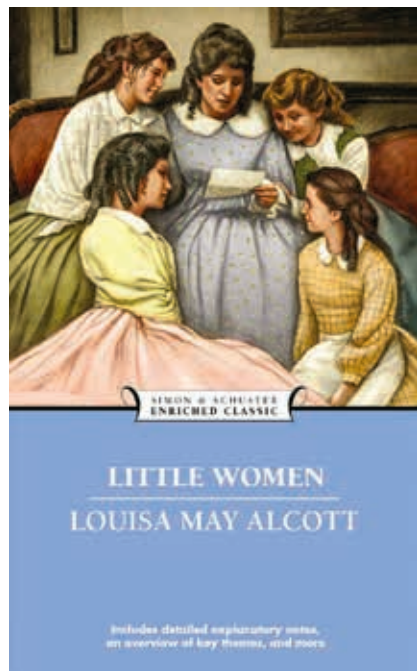
A Time of Change

During her lifetime, Louisa May Alcott witnessed a period of head-spinning growth and change in America and the world. Locally, her parents were members of the Transcendental Movement, which arose in New England at that time. Its adherents grappled through a philosophical fog toward an understanding of human anthropology better than those who followed the tradition of Puritanism or the Rationalism of the Industrial Age, which were then at odds.

A far from exhaustive list of changes in the United States from her birth to the book’s publication includes the ongoing acquisition of territory and creation of new states, the growth of railroads, the founding of universities, hospitals, libraries, banks, and publishers, wars for territory in the frontier, the temperance movement, a cholera pandemic, industrialization, the gold rush, a surge of immigration, and clashes among abolitionists and proponents of slave labor culminating in the American Civil War, which ended just three years before the publication of “Little Women.”

Alcott’s characters apparently experienced little of this. Mr. March was away from home, having volunteered as a chaplain to the brave men fighting at “the front.” We are only left to assume, for lack of explication, that this is the Civil War, which would be in

▶ “Little Women” is more than a book for children.



the forefront of the minds of her readers, but it is left vague.

Battles Within

Vagueness, rather than vogue-ness, is employed by Alcott and contributes to the book’s appeal over so many generations. It is not definitely tied to any particular time or set of beliefs but speaks to transcendent human qualities. Its center and focus is the family home and the human heart.

The beliefs of the March family are not explicit. Reference is made to John Bunyan’s Puritan classic, “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” as inspiring games of play-acting in the girls’ younger days. Mrs. March later exhorts Jo to find consolation in her “ever-present Father above” when Jo appeals to her mother’s aid in conquering her volcanic temper. Amy learned the benefits of solitary meditation aided by a beautiful image of the Madonna and Child, from her aunt’s French servant, a Catholic.

However, the struggle to grow in virtue and self-control is central to the book. While the Civil War may be somewhere in the background of the story, the main battles are fought within the hearts of the March girls, under the gentle tutelage of their wise mother. “Marmee,” as they call her, never scolds or nags, but leads and encourages her daughters toward virtuous decisions as they face their individual temptations.

The Marches’ genteel poverty grates on each of them in different ways. Meg desires the nice things other girls have. Quick-tempered Jo wants to make a name (and fortune) for herself, doing something big. Beth, who is naturally virtuous, feels her little part is not what it should be as a lady.

Each girl comes face-to-face with her temptation, teeters, and ultimately overcomes it. Meg finds herself among wealthy, fashionable friends and succumbs to the allure of vanity, being dressed up in borrowed fineries and behaving frivolously. Her disgust with herself returns her to the realization that integrity and the regard of those she loves is a greater good than pretty trifles.

Jo battles her choleric temper, which flares up at Amy when the younger sister destroys months of writing work (the pride of her heart) in an act of resentment. Jo’s disdain for Amy nearly ends in tragedy when she allows her younger sister to fall through thin ice while skating. The occasion brings Jo to dedicate herself to working to control her passions, the free run of which brings only sorrow.

Beth’s frontline of temptation is more subtle than the others’ because she is naturally virtu-

ous and sweet. The shy sister’s victory is the realization, on her deathbed, that her contribution to domestic happiness is, in fact, enough.

Amy, the pretentious youngest, seems to achieve all her outward desires. Her ambition was to become the best she could aspire to. Through prayerful meditation on the good and beautiful and constant adjusting of her tendencies to a closer approximation of her aspiration, she actually does become a fine lady, with all the attendant luxuries.

A Unique Vantage Point

Alcott had had some small publishing success when her publisher suggested she write “a girl’s book.” Whether or not her heart was in it as she wrote, she certainly hit the bull’s-eye with “Little Women.” It was right on target at the time and has remained a hit in the hearts of succeeding generations of readers ever since.

Having spent her life within the sphere of influence of intellectuals and writers at a time of rapid change in philosophy, technology, education, and women’s rights, among others, Alcott was well-placed to see back along the path from which American society was emerging and forward toward the direction in which it was headed. She was smart enough to make something of this pivotal position. Her book embraces traditional goods as well as the changes that allowed for a greater development of the person than had been acceptable in the strict social atmosphere of the time.

Today’s reader finds more that is familiar than is outdated in this work written over 150 years ago. Much of the Transcendentalist thought and theory became the foundation of the educational system that is now standard in the United States. While Alcott bore little resemblance to the feminists of today, she supported women’s suffrage and increased opportunity for women to excel in their area of talent beyond what was common at the time.

She endorsed literacy in the arts and wholesome exercise. These newer views are woven (sometimes didactically) through her book, all the while remaining pinned to the traditional and enduring goods of virtue, integrity, and domestic happiness.

“Little Women” is a bright and attractive refuge of familiar domestic life, realistically rendered. G.K. Chesterton suggested that Alcott’s book “anticipated realism by twenty or thirty years.” The success of Alcott’s little women lies in the development of their characters, rather than merely their happily-ever-after marriages. As in real life, marriage is not the end, but one of the events that help shape the person.

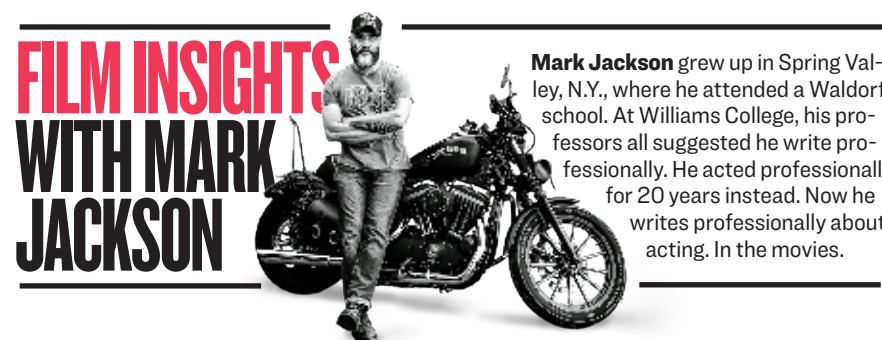
Louisa May Alcott gathers into “Little Women” the goods common to people of all times, and builds newer ideas onto that foundation in a natural way that was not shocking to her contemporary audience. Nor do they seem dated to today’s readers. Her subtle insight into the enduring truths of human nature may have been overlooked by academics, yet Alcott deftly navigates the rapid current of change in her time to produce a valuable piece of literature that refuses to be relegated to the nursery as “just a children’s book.” She has produced a gem of American literature.

Susannah Pearce holds a master’s degree in theology and writes from her home in South Carolina.

Its center and focus is the family home and the human heart.



(Above left) (L–R) Geena Davis, Brad Pitt in his breakout performance, and Susan Sarandon in “Thelma & Louise.” (Above right) At some point, there is no turning back. Louise (Susan Sarandon, L) and Thelma (Geena Davis) running from the law. (Below) Susan Sarandon (L) and Geena Davis play gals on a vacation that turns into a wild adventure, in “Thelma & Louise.”



REWIND, REVIEW, AND RE-RATE

‘Thelma & Louise’: An Unfair Fight for Feminism

MARK JACKSON

I saw “Thelma & Louise,” Ridley Scott’s paean to feminism in 1991 with an acting school ex-classmate. I observed the drug-like effect that one of the film’s minor characters was having on her, and I made a note to keep an eye on the career of a young actor whose golden hair and ripped abs were only part of his already formidable X-factor. You can always spot a star being born, like Scarlett Johansson in “Ghost World,” Jack Black in “Bob Roberts,” and Tim Robbins in “Bull Durham.”

Though I myself didn’t bliss out over the then unknown Brad Pitt in like fashion, director Scott’s panoramic, drop-dead-gorgeous lensing of Utah and Arizona’s red-rock mesas, buttes, otherworldly desert dreamscapes, and the glorious highways that bisect them are like potent drugs to bikers.

Like “Easy Rider” before it, I immediately needed to own this movie. I owned it on VHS, then DVD, had the soundtrack on my iPod, still own it, and still want to carve those red-rock canyons on two wheels, with a couple of extra gas cans strapped to my Harley.

That said, and despite the fact that it was a zeitgeist film with a powerful influence that’s long since entered the American cultural lexicon, I’ve realized a few things about “Thelma & Louise.” I think feminism wins the fight here. But it’s not at all a fair fight.

Sweet Southern Gals

Tall, beautiful, sweet, docile, easily intimidated Thelma Dickinson (Geena Davis) and her older, equally pretty, kind, but significantly more hard-bitten diner-waitress friend Louise Sawyer (Susan Sarandon) are twangy-talking bosom-buddies who decide they need to get outta town and go fishing.

They don’t know much about fishing. Louise packs her entire wardrobe, and Thelma drops the snub-nose revolver gifted by her husband, dauntily, via thumb and forefinger, into her luggage as an afterthought.

What do they need a vacation from? Waitressing, house-wifery, and the two complete idiots they’re involved with: Thelma’s Corvette-driving, gargantuan-ego’d rug-salesman hubby Darryl (Christopher McDonald’s hysterical, cartoonish character-study of bullying) and Louise’s eternally sighing, louche, noncommittal, lounge-musician boyfriend, Jimmy (Michael Madsen).

Off they go in Louise’s faded turquoise 1966 Thunderbird convertible, leaving sleepy Arkansas quickly fading in the rearview mirror, and we find ourselves (mostly due to McDonald’s hilarious shenanigans) well-primed for a screwball road-buddy comedy.

(Left) Gorgeous panoramic shots of the desert add to the film’s appeal. (Right) As their journey continues, the women engage in criminal acts. Susan Sarandon (L) and Geena Davis.



‘Thelma & Louise’

Director
Ridley Scott

Starring
Susan Sarandon, Geena Davis, Harvey Keitel, Stephen Tobolowsky, Christopher McDonald, Brad Pitt, Michael Madsen, Timothy Carhart

Rated
R

Running Time
2 hours, 10 minutes

Release Date
May 24, 1991

Rated
4.5 stars out of 5 for fun, 1.5 stars for dividing and conquering the sexes



Our girls make a pit stop, decide to throw back a couple of margaritas and Cuervo shots, do a little boot-scootin’ to the rousing country band, and here comes sweet-talking local predator Harlan (Timothy Carhart), who before long is slapping around and attempting to rape Thelma up against a car in the parking lot. Suddenly, it’s not funny anymore.

Louise to the rescue with Thelma’s handgun; however, Harlan’s so insufferably, sneeringly unapologetic that Louise caves in to her omnipresent PTSD (due to her own similar past experience) and blasts Harlan to kingdom come. Should have blown out his knee instead, but she nails him square in the heart. A crime of pure passion, it is. And how can we not cheer a little bit?

Our heroines hit the road, headed for Mexico, across the Oklahoma flatlands and into the Chihuahuan high desert of southeastern Arizona (all of which looks incredibly romantic when seen from a classic T-bird).

What began as a weekend romp segues into a wild (and Wild Turkey-fueled) transformative odyssey, with hellhounds (of law enforcement) on their trail. Theirs is a tragically snowballing metaphorical acid trip, a shadow rite of passage: liberation, maturation, and empowerment begat by a fateful descent into criminality.

Toxic Males

There are signposts and further pit stops along the way, and all of them are various forms of despicable men. One such Pitt-stop is a cowboy-hatted, hitchhiking, hayseed-hotie juvenile delinquent (conveniently named J.D.), who romances naïve Thelma till she’s cross-eyed, teaches her how to rob a convenience store, and then robs her blind.

Then there’s the redneck “suicide jockey” (fuel-tank trucker played by Marco St. John) whom they pass and re-pass out on the highway. When he refuses to curb his disgusting catcalls and obscene gesticulations, they seduce him off the road and, using their “Learned-it-off-the-TV!” firearm skills, flatten his tires and blow his 18-wheeler sky-high. Isn’t that fun? What’s even more fun is that director Scott didn’t tell actor Marco St. John that the rig was going to actually blow—the ensuing reaction is priceless.

Who else is nasty? The nazi highway patrolman (Jason Beghe) who pulls them over for speeding. Normally nice Thelma, her latent talent for commanding dicey situations via cop-speak blossoming forth from her like unto Pallas Athena springing from the brow of Zeus, orders him into his patrol-car trunk. “Blam!!” “Why’d you shoot the car?” “Air holes.” Anndd the nazi cop starts bawling like a baby. Isn’t that fun?

What’s even more fun is the MTV-like

follow-up scene, where a weed-addled Rastafarian bicyclist (Noel L. Walcott) in full race-sponsored spandex regalia, water bottle and giant spiff in hand, blows marijuana smoke into that selfsame air hole because he fancies in his blissed-out stupor that he hears a disembodied voice coming out of it.

So that’s Darryl, Jimmy, Harlan, J.D., the dirty trucker, and the nazi cop, whose despicable-ness all conveniently contribute to the outlaw desperation, moral demise, and eventual martyrdom of two lovely ladies.

Combine that with the scenic road trip and binge drinking, which allow Thelma and Louise to feel liberated and alive as never before. Stir in the fact that they get to blow away bad guys and be alpha-dominant. It all presents as a veritable scorecard of various high-five-able comeuppances to delirious females and feminists everywhere. All of which somehow conspires to make this feel like quite a legit state of affairs—this business of two perfectly normal women robbing stores, shooting guns, blowing stuff up, and driving off cliffs. Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis both earned Oscar nominations.

What Do Women Want?

That’s the classic question mark that sits above every man’s head. Does feminist action-fantasy “Thelma & Louise” answer it? This stylized, half-comic, half-tragic saga of desperado heroines on the lam begins realistically, goes all anarcho, outlaw-biker-gonzo, swipes the ending off “Butch Cassidy,” and then pretends to the throne of late ’60s, early ’70s feminism by facilely laying the blame at the feet of six bad men.

And Jimmy’s not really a bad guy. Neither is the cop—he’s just a family man doing his job (maybe he poses a little bit). So, four toxic males. Actually, Darryl and J.D. are not exactly toxic but more resoundingly “ugh” and “meh”—you can see, deep down, that J.D.’s actually a misguided kid with a good heart. So two truly toxic males.

Why is it, I wonder, that women from all walks of life are going on the all-female “Woman Within” Weekends, the female counterpart to the all-male New Warrior Training Adventure, which likewise mines, in mytho-poetic fashion, tribal life for clues and revived understandings about how the roles of the feminine and masculine are meant, by tradition (and therefore prescribed by the gods), to be played? Why is it that dyed-in-the-wool feminists and very butch, sworn man-haters are coming out of there embracing the traditional notions that females should be feminine and serve their families?

Ancient wisdom says yang is the light and yin is the darkness; yang is order and yin is chaos, yang is white and yin is black, yang is good and yin is evil. Both are needed to create everything in the cosmos. But darkness and chaos attributed to women ... seems unfair. Do men get all the good stuff?

It all makes sense if viewed from a particular perspective that says the primordial, original souls of human beings switch off and alternately incarnate physically, first as male, then as female, and then back again. We switch back and forth—and so fairness and balance is created over the long run. How about that? Kinda gets you thinking.

But, regardless of its feminist stacked deck, “Thelma & Louise” is still one of the most fun movies you’ll ever see.

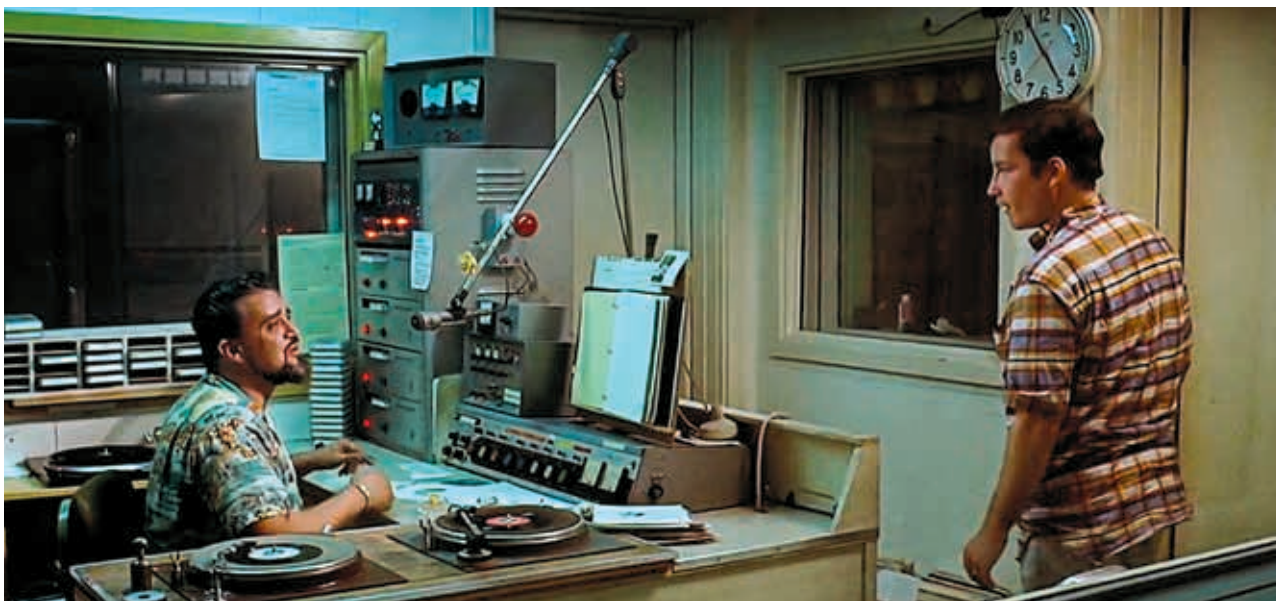


◀ Louisa May Alcott, the author of “Little Women.”

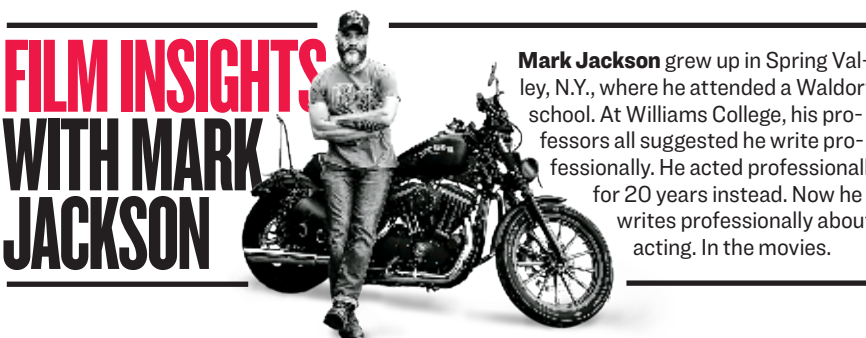




John Milner (Paul Le Mat, L) and Curt Henderson (Richard Dreyfuss) in "American Graffiti."



Wolfman Jack (L) as himself, and Richard Dreyfuss, in "American Graffiti."



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting, in the movies.

ICONIC FILMS

'American Graffiti' Versus 'Dazed and Confused': American Innocence Slowly Evaporates

MARK JACKSON

I have a personal welcoming-in-the-spring ritual: On a warm, slightly humid, purple-lilacs-fragrant, late-May evening that carries the nostalgic promise of the "Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels" of early summer, I re-watch 1973's "American Graffiti." And if another such evening presents itself a week later, I re-watch 1993's "Dazed and Confused."

Director Richard Linklater acknowledges in the "Dazed" DVD commentary that when he made his studio pitch, he envisioned "Dazed" as an "American Graffiti" for the 1970s. A tribute. "Dazed" is more or less the exact same teenage, last-day-of-high-school, up-all-night-partying movie, except "Graffiti" (historically known as the first movie to run multiple story lines simultaneously) chronicles American teenage life in 1962, and "Dazed" describes our teenage life in 1976.

Here's a quick summation of the difference between the journeys of the main protagonist in each film: In "American Graffiti," Curt Henderson (Richard Dreyfuss) overcomes his fear of leaving a small California town, gets on the plane to an Eastern college, and kicks off his Hero's Journey to become a writer.

In "Dazed and Confused," Randall "Pink" Floyd (Jason London), on the other hand, goes into full-tilt rebellion, refuses to sign his overhearing coach's pledge to stop doing drugs, and thereby cuts his nose off to spite his face because he'll no longer be the high school starting quarterback.

Seems like an honorable thing to do, right? Refuse quarterbacking because you resent your school's responsible adults requesting you to reject smoking reefer?

Now, the other character that both movies share—John Milner (Paul Le Mat) of "Graffiti" and Wooderson (Matthew McConaughey) in "Dazed"—represents Amer-

ica's "townie" syndrome, that is, the he-was-cool-in-high-school slacker with little or no ambition who's still hanging around the local high school trying to pick up girls. At least Milner was the local drag-racing king, whereas Wooderson's hot car is just to attract underage high school girls. They represent the inability to leave small-town life and go on the Hero's Journey.

And at the end of "American Graffiti," Curt leaves Milner at the airport, whereas in "Dazed," Pink jumps in Wooderson's muscle-up Chevelle as they catch their third wind (of weed smoking) and, with the sun coming up, burn rubber down the highway while firing up a fresh joint.

"Who cares?" you might say. Touché—this is not high art. And yet, these are the cultural signposts that indicate how, imperceptibly under the guise of good times and party-hearty, America's morality has gone to the dogs.

'American Graffiti'

"American Graffiti" takes place in 1962, right before the Beatles, Bob Dylan, psychedelic drugs, the Kennedys' and MLK's assassinations, Vietnam, and the rise of political protest, Woodstock, and late-1960s counterculture.

The music of the day is the still-innocent doo-wop, which is also diegetic (meaning it's heard by the characters in the film as well as the audience), all of which serves to create time and place in an almost magical way.

"Graffiti" describes the teenage years of its now legendary filmmakers: writer-director George Lucas (who later created the "Star Wars" franchise, and upon whom the character of hot-rod John Milner is loosely based), and producer Francis Ford Coppola (who had just directed "The Godfather").

Made in 1973 and taking place on one summer night in Modesto, California, "Graffiti" depicts a variety of mini-adven-

tures, shenanigans, yearnings, revelations, and teen philosophizing by a group of kids for whom life is about to change drastically and forever.

Of all the movie's main characters—drag-racer John Milner, ultra-nerd Terry "The Toad" Fields (Charles Martin Smith), and all-American college-boy-to-be Steve Bolander (Ron Howard), who hang out at Mel's Drive-In—it's everyman Curt Henderson who is the most interesting.

Unlike class president Steve, who dates Curt's cheerleader sister Laurie (Cindy Williams) and who seems to-the-manor-born collegiate, Curt was clearly destined to remain in Modesto if he hadn't earned a college scholarship.

No Life After High School

So, over the course of the night, Curt observes his high school teacher, who admits he'd had a shot at attending the exclusive Middlebury College but came back with his tail between his legs—now having a relationship with one of his female students.

Curt hunts down the legendary radio disk jockey Wolfman Jack, whose disembodied, hilarious diatribes rule the legions of cruising car radio airwaves, and who, like some rude, fun uncle, dispenses ribald wisdoms and wolf howls along with rock 'n' roll playlists.

Curt tracks the Wolfman to his hiding place in a radio tower on the outskirts of town. Everybody's got a romanticized theory about the Wolfman: "He broadcasts out of Mexico!" "He flies around in a spaceship and never comes down!" Curt discovers an Oz-like man in a lonely sound-isolation booth, eating popsicles and talking into the night.

Both films, by being technically about nothing at all, truly capture the modern American teenage experience, which includes the boredom and suffocation of small-town life.

'Dazed and Confused'

Curt recognizes that John Milner is going nowhere fast, in a yellow deuce coupe. Curt is rudely awakened to the fact that his obsession with a mysterious, elusive blonde in a white Ford Thunderbird (Suzanne Somers), who mouths "I love you" (representing the mirage of unattainable desire, always glimpsed turning the corner at the end of the next street) is, in reality, a "dirty-dollar Sherry." Curt sees behind the scenes and glimpses the far less glamorous, less exciting adult world that will consume him if he doesn't seize the day.

Cruising and Car Culture

"American Graffiti" depicts the height of 1950s and '60s American car culture; the entire movie is a giant car-homage to '57 Chevys, '32 Ford deuce coupes, '53 'Vettes, "Darryl Starbird's Superfleck Moonbird,"



Bob Falfa's (Harrison Ford) '55 Chevy (L) and John Milner's (Paul Le Mat) '32 Ford in "American Graffiti."



Benny (Cole Hauser) puts finishing touches on his freshman paddle in "Dazed and Confused."

Harley-Davidson Flatheads, dune buggies, and the sounds of insanely enhanced engines yowling and tires burning rubber.

And so, as the scales begin to fall from Curt's eyes, cars also, symbolically, start getting stolen and crashed. Milner has a monologue in a car graveyard: "That right there is Freddie Benson's 'Vette. He got his in a head-on collision with a drunk."

Milner eventually goes up against the sneering Bob Falfa (Harrison Ford in his movie debut), who crashes and burns (but was faster), and Milner realizes his days are numbered.

All of which also signifies the end of the post-World War II American dream. Whole societies, cultures, fashions, and trends have come and gone since 1962, but if American post-high school reality was bleak back then, it continued to worsen.

Dazed and Confused

"Dazed and Confused" is about a Texas high school class of 1976. I was New York class of '78, and this movie is my high school experience exactly—minus the making of wooden paddles by seniors in shop class with which to beat incoming freshman in a summer-long hazing ritual.

Americans who came of age in the '70s have always thought they were born a decade too late; and that the coolest decade of all was clearly the '60s, with back-to-the-land communes, Jefferson Airplane, acid trips, "tune in, turn on, and drop out," Woodstock, Afros, Jew-fros, Janis and Jimi, peace signs, hip-huggers, and love-ins.

The '70s was when the hippie culture of the '60s cool kids diluted and dispersed to the uncool, leading to three-piece, bell-bottomed, polyester suits; platform shoes; porn 'staches; chocolate-brown shag rugs; lava lamps; eight-track cassette decks; olive-colored, suede, moc-toe bluchers, and other hideous fashion statements; disco; down vests; "feathered" hair; puka shells; AMC Pacers; and keg parties.

High-schoolers in the 1970s felt a prolonged, anticlimactic, cynical hangover from the 1960s' euphoria. They felt deflated, disenfranchised, sold out, and distrustful. The '70s seemed like a decade to be endured until the arrival of the savior-like '80s (one hoped, as does a "Dazed" character at a keg party), not a decade to actually enjoy. Except for maybe Led Zeppelin, weed, Bruce Lee, Mark Spitz, and Billy Jack. And everywhere were vehement signs that stated, "Disco Sucks!"

But Richard Linklater's "Dazed and Confused" is an uproarious paean to the '70s and, as such, sprinkles the fairy dust of nostalgia over the mess the 1970s actually were by giving us, à la "Graffiti," that same, up-all-night, bacchanalian celebration of freedom ("... no more books, no more teacher's dirty looks").

Male seniors chase and paddle the next year's freshmen, and the girls are forced by the female seniors to lay out in the school parking lot, be sprayed with ketchup, mustard, eggs, and flour, before getting collectively car-washed in the back of a pickup truck. This is all America has retained from ancient tribal initiation rituals.

And, same as in '62, they all go cruising around aimlessly, looking to bust their boredom: here by banging mailboxes with

baseball bats and waiting for news of the next big beer bash to break.

In this light, the things we '70s kids hated at the time, like Seals & Crofts's FM-lite kitsch, "Summer Breeze, makes me feel fine, playing like the jazz-man in my mind," now feel nostalgic, rather sweet, and relatively uncorrupted. But again—these are signposts.

There was, as of yet, no 1980s' crack, 1990s' meth, or 2010s' opioid epidemic. There was high school sex, but one still listened to Meat Loaf singing about "Paradise by the Dashboard Light," where the girl said, "Stop right there, I gotta know right now, before we go any further, do you love me? ... Will you take me away and will you make me your wife?"

There was no AIDS. It wasn't yet Prince in the 1980s singing: "In France, a skinny man died of a big disease with a little name. By chance his girlfriend came across a needle and soon she did the same. At home there are 17-year-old boys and their idea of fun, is being in a gang called 'The Disciples,' high on crack, and totin' a machine gun."

Extrapolating From High School

The '60s and '70s are innocent in comparison to the '90s and onward. Both "Dazed and Confused" and "American Graffiti" are arguably two of the best coming-of-age films ever made. The films are aimless because the characters are aimless. Both films, by being technically about nothing at all, truly capture the modern American teenage experience, which includes the boredom and suffocation of small-town life.

"American Graffiti" and "Dazed and Confused" are both bittersweet pills regarding the time in America that red M.A.G.A. hats hark back to: innocent times with higher moral values. Bittersweet because "American Graffiti" implies that high school is just a party veneer hiding the bleaker American reality that spawned the F. Scott Fitzgerald phrase from "My Lost City": "There are no second acts in American lives." American high school is often the first act. It's this underlying cultural hint that we should seize the day that moves one to re-watch both these films ad infinitum.

'American Graffiti'

Director George Lucas	Running Time 1 hour, 50 minutes
Starring Harrison Ford, Richard Dreyfuss, Paul Le Mat, Ron Howard, Cindy Williams, Mackenzie Phillips, Charles Martin Smith, Candy Clark	Rated PG
	Release Date Aug. 11, 1973
	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

'Dazed and Confused'

Director Richard Linklater	Running Time 1 hour, 42 minutes
Starring Matthew McConaughey, Ben Affleck, Parker Posey, Milla Jovovich, Renée Zellweger, Adam Goldberg, Anthony Rapp, Nicky Katt, Cole Hauser, Sasha Jensen, Jason London, Wiley Wiggins	Rated R
	Release Date Sept. 24, 1993 (USA limited)
	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

In the Details: Whether Creating or Enjoying Creation

MASHA SAVITZ

Capturing the festive May Day ritual, 19th-century painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema's "Spring" depicts a procession of beautiful girls and women carrying colorful flowers and wearing floral wreaths, descending the stairs of a classical marble structure. The classical-subject painter re-envisioned the Victorian custom of children gathering flowers from the countryside on the morning of May 1 and placed the opulent scene in ancient Rome. In this way, he suggests the festival's great antiquity, through architectural details, dress, sculpture, and even the musical instruments based on Roman originals.

In the foreground of this large canvas stands a girl in a pale hydrangea-blue dress, playing a flute. On very close examination, we see that the silver flute's mouthpiece is shaped like a tiny creature. Such a tiny detail is almost incomprehensible! How and why does Alma-Tadema put such meticulous effort into this minute detail?

We may find redemptive answers if we apply the precious gift of focused attention on details. These can prove healing, calming, and enlightening. Quieting the outer noise can help us bear witness to and, if we are artists, then record the magnificent phenomenon called life.

Details Make Art Come Alive

When we invest ourselves, especially in masterworks, we get so much in return. The viewer feels cared for, gifted by treasures that slowly reveal themselves to those who pay attention.

Jacqueline Woodson, an award-winning writer, has been quoted as saying: "The more specific we are, the more universal something can become. Life is in the details. If you generalize, it doesn't resonate. The specificity of it is what resonates." The more authentically rendered the seemingly small details are, for example, in the painting "Spring"—a little girl's foot poised just off the ground or the gestures and gazes of the faces—the truer painting is, and the more we can identify with it and believe it.

Details are especially important when what is depicted is unfamiliar to us, as in the case of creating fantasy or worlds of the past.

Why do we feel that "Spring" and the ancient May festival is so alive to us? Because Alma-Tadema himself had invested in learning as much—

as many details—about the ancient Greeks and Romans as possible.

Alma-Tadema's appetite and curiosity about the ancient world were insatiable. The knowledge he acquired was incorporated into over 300 paintings of ancient archaeological and architectural designs. His commitment to accurately depicting history offers us incredible information, conveyed, in the case of "Spring," through the details of clothing, instruments, and architectural structures. Taken together, these give us a feeling of what it might have been like to be in the ancient world.

As Alma-Tadema said, according to The Dublin University Magazine of 1879: "If you want to know what those Greeks and Romans looked like, ... come to me. For I can show not only what I think but what I know."

Acknowledging the Creator

In an online video, New Masters Academy instructor Glenn Vilppu says, "You don't really see something until you draw it; you think you see something, but you're not really seeing it."

Vilppu is talking about seeing things deeply and how that allows a kind of devotion to the craft and to the subject before one; it enables a commitment to telling the truth about a subject and, in doing so, revealing a deeper truth about it—a beauty or an essence.

Similarly, we can train our eyes to notice beauty anywhere and everywhere by lovingly observing nature's details. This, in turn, fosters and nurtures a deep appreciation of life and our natural world.

By study, with undivided attention, it is as if our consciousness can be transported into the smallest of spaces. Perhaps it is even a form of prayer, or an act of sanctifying creation and the Creator by offering our devotion.

According to orthodox traditions, the point of the arts is to praise the Creator and creation. To extrapolate on this idea, then, to depict with great attention the smallest of details is a sacred act. Michelangelo said, "The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection." Acknowledging and admiring the details of the natural world honors the Creator, and thus the creator in us. In this way, we are reminded of the splendor and wonder that is creation.

Reaching for Eternal Patience

Getting the details right takes time and effort, and that requires great

patience. We build our facility for patience, fortitude, resolve, and steadfastness in describing and viewing these seemingly small details.

Taking the time and making the effort to get the correct angles of perspective, the proper proportions of the anatomically accurate bone structure of the hand, to see and duplicate all the varied shades of green and pinks in the bouquet of roses on the table, to understand the slight and drastic shifts of lights and darks of the folds of cloth—these are the myriad details that will improve our skills, improve our capacity for patience, develop respect for truthfulness, and cultivate a love of beauty that makes us strive even harder to portray it. And thus, in turn, we will engender these feeling in others.

We can be tempted in our throw-away, immediate-gratification world to feel as though this kind of effort is not worth the trouble. When our efforts put into these details are not acknowledged, is this an efficient use of time?

Yes. In the book "At the Ballet: On Stage, Backstage" by Sandra Lee, Thomas Hunt, and Tom Hunt, a San Francisco Ballet costume designer is asked, "Why do you spend so much time on the tiny details of the costumes if the audience will never see them?" And she answered, "The dancers will see it and will dance better because of it."

Thus, the time and effort we put into work will, in some way, express itself positively.

"Genius is eternal patience," Michelangelo said.

Details Inspire

Alma-Tadema's paintings enjoyed popularity when his large, panoramic depictions of Greek and Roman life caught the attention of Hollywood. Certain scenes in Cecil B. DeMille's film "Cleopatra" (1934) were inspired by the painting "Spring."

When we take the time to do things well, whatever task we are charged with, then the attention to preparing a meal, grading tests, caring for people, or creating art will, in turn, inspire others to want to do the same—their best.

And in paying attention to what might seem like insignificant details, we demonstrate great care for ourselves, each other, and the world.

Masha Savitz is a freelance writer and filmmaker in the Los Angeles area.



(Top) Detail of the flutist in "Spring," 1894, by Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

(Above) Detail of musicians and procession in "Spring," 1894, by Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

(Right) "Spring," 1894, by Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Oil on canvas; 70 1/4 inches by 31 5/8 inches. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



ALL IMAGES PUBLIC DOMAIN

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION: FILMS THAT UPLIFT THE SOUL

An Unlikely Friendship Helps a King

MOMENTUM PICTURES

IAN KANE

Being able to communicate with others is something that a lot of folks take for granted—yours truly included. This is especially clear after watching director Tom Hooper's royalty-centric bio-drama "The King's Speech."

The film opens in 1925. King George V (Michael Gambon) has requested that his second son, Prince Albert (Colin Firth), deliver the closing speech at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. There's only one issue: Albert, known as "Berty" by his family, suffers from a severe stammer. As an inkling of how terrified he is of public speaking, as he shambles up to the microphone, he looks as though he is being led to the gallows.

The resulting speech, if you could call it that, resembles an aural train wreck. Even with the full support of his loving wife, Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter), Albert humiliates himself; he croaks a few words and then everything fades into horrid silence. After that crushing defeat, he swears to her that he'll never speak publicly again.

Elizabeth, who seems to see something in Albert that he can't, seeks out help for her husband. She eventually and clandestinely finds the speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush), who lives in a dodgy, lower-class neighborhood. Logue, an Australian actor turned therapist, is a very confident man whose therapy methods are controversial. He insists that the royal pair visit his office for therapy sessions, instead of being summoned to the royal quarters as Elizabeth requests.

Later, in Logue's inner office, Albert takes the office in, noting its

odd pairing of spaciousness and minimal furnishings, along with some unusually colorful wallpaper: indicators of an eccentric personality.

Forging a True Friendship

At first, the two clash—Albert, the veritable immovable object, and Logue, the irresistible force. Albert is stuffy and firmly requests that Logue regard him officiously. Conversely, Logue demands that Albert treat him as an equal and play by his rules in what he calls "my castle."

The second act sees Logue gradually chipping away at Albert's officious walls. Albert begins to reveal some of the skeletons in his royal closet, including the fact that he suffered both physical and psychological abuse as child, from those closest to him. The two eventually settle into a rather guarded friendship and manage to make some progress with the prince's stammering issues.

Colin Firth is superb as the reluctant king.

One day, Albert tells Logue that his older brother David (Guy Pearce), scheduled to succeed their father as king, is dead set on marrying an American divorcee of ill repute. But the title doesn't allow for such an outrageously scandalous match. Logue strongly encourages Albert to wrest control of the family leadership and become king himself. Albert, seeing Logue's suggestion as treasonous, ends their relationship.

Eventually, lust-struck David relinquishes the highest title in



What do a prince and a speech therapist have in common? Friendship. Colin Firth (L) and Geoffrey Rush in "The King's Speech."

the land, and Albert is forced to ascend the throne as King George VI. At this point, all of Albert's insecurities (he still stammers) bubble up under the immense pressure of the position he finds himself in and he realizes he needs help. He visits Logue; the two men bury the hatchet and become real friends—ones without boundaries.

The film culminates in 1939 when war with Germany is on the horizon and Albert is to address Great Britain and all of its colonies in a national speech, the titular "King's Speech." Albert is handed the speech and told that he has to perform it within an extremely short timeframe. He summons Logue and the two men have a last-minute speech-coaching lesson. But will Logue's training pay off in this crucial hour of need?

A Cinematic Masterpiece

What "The King's Speech" boils down to is a deeply moving historical drama about one of the most

unlikely of friendships between two who, ordinarily, would never meet. Circumstances dictated that they did, and England was the better for it. Logue unleashes the natural leader within Albert without kowtowing to the royals and proves himself: Although he was never formally trained, his natural ability and unusual methods work.

Screenwriter David Seidler's script is taut, with heartfelt dialogue (with light elements of comedy thrown in) between the very capable actors on hand. Firth is superb as the reluctant king, showing vulnerability behind a noble façade and revealing the incalculable pressures and responsibilities that come with equally immense power. Rush and Carter likewise portray their roles with the utmost of skill, as an eccentric therapist and a caring wife, respectively.

"The King's Speech" is a rousing, sublimely crafted film about friendship and the ability to reach

down within oneself to harness inner powers—so much so, that the final scene will probably bring a tear or five to many an eye.

And don't be scared off by the "R" rating. That's due to some strong language during the speech therapy sessions.

Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To see more, visit DreamFlight-Ent.com

'The King's Speech'

Director
Tom Hooper

Starring
Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush, Helena Bonham Carter

Running Time
1 hour, 58 minutes

Rated
R

Release Date
Dec. 25, 2010 (USA)

★★★★★

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