”Pleasantville” Case Study

"Flashback to kinder, gentler times," states the narrator in the opening scenes of the 1998 comedy, Pleasantville. The movie begins in America during the 1990s and features a teenaged brother and sister, David and Jennifer. David is portrayed as a guy who never gets into trouble and has an obsession with the 1950s show Pleasantville. David's sister, Jennifer, can be seen as the typical 90s teenager; she wears the latest clothes, is boy crazy, and follows the crowd. When the pair's argument over the remote control results in its destruction, the TV-repair man (actor, Don Knotts) shows up to solve the problem. (Knotts' presence in the movie serves as symbolism, but that will be discussed later.) The repair man gives David and Jennifer a new remote, and when they use it, they are transported into the Pleasantville sit-com where they replace the fictional siblings. As the movie progresses, they introduce many changes to Pleasantville and slowly give colour to the black-and-white town - something that the citizens don't view as very "pleasant".

**Functionalism**

Pleasantville demonstrates the functionalist perspective in sociology. From the functionalist perspective, Pleasantville is the ideal society. Every citizen knows his or her role in society and flawlessly carries it out. This is why Pleasantville is so pleasant. In Pleasantville, every adult woman is a married, and every wife is a homemaker. In this reality, the husbands don't have to know how to cook or do house work because they have never needed to. When change is introduced into this society, a few of the parts of the organism do not function properly. Some of the housewives realize that there are exciting things outside the boundaries of their home. Consequently, a few of the chores at home get neglected. This minor interruption in the home sets off a chain of events. The main mother character meets an unmarried ice cream shop owner and begins spending more and more evenings away from home. When her husband comes home one evening, he only hears the echo of "Honey, I'm home." As he searches the house for his wife, he doesn't ask himself, "Where's my wife?" Instead, he asks himself, "Where's my dinner?" He doesn't miss his wife, but rather the role that she played in his routine.

He has become dependent on her to take care of him, and she was previously dependent on him to provide money for the family, since she was busy at home all day. This system is no longer necessary for the wife because she has realized that she can become an equally independent person, able to care for herself. If she and he so choose, they can still have a relationship, but it would be one based on compatibility and emotion, not economic necessity. However, the wife's newfound independence interrupts her husband's view of the family system. According to the functionalist perspective, this disturbance would lead to a larger disturbance in society. The film later shows the "big picture" result of the disorder in the family.

After giving up on finding his dinner, the husband wanders to the bowling alley where he meets a few of his friends. He shares his story, and everyone is horror-stricken. Another man removes his jacket and reveals a burn caused by an iron. He tells everyone that his wife told him that she was just thinking. The word takes everyone by surprise. They have realized that there is an epidemic threatening their well-oiled machine. The epidemic is called change and independence. The mayor of the town is one of the men at the bowling alley, and he decides to take action by calling a town meeting and creating new rules and restrictions for the town. The mayor realizes that if the citizens do not maintain their roles, then a perfect society will cease to exist. This is the case in reality. People don't always do what they are supposed to, and consequently, there is divorce, poverty, crime, and many other social problems.

**Pleasantville and change**

Change is probably the most prominent value that is promoted in the film. Change had many symbols in the movie, but the use of colour was the most apparent one. As each character violated the norms that were set by the ideal 1950s society, he or she would transform from black and white to fully coloured. The afore mentioned mother gained colour as her relationship advanced with the owner of ice cream shop. Her affair and absence from home was doing damage to the family, which was an important value of the during the time period. From a 50s point of view, leaving her husband would have been considered absolutely outrageous, but from the 90s perspective, this was the change that she needed in order to be happy. Consider the political events of the late 90s. The American president himself was involved in an extramarital affair. If this had happened in the 1950s, he would no longer be working in politics, and he certainly would not be campaigning for another candidate.

Of course the object of the unfaithful wife also is experiencing change. After breaking the monotony of running a soda shop, he recognizes that the only thing that truly makes him happy is painting. Previously, he only painted once a year when he painted the store window for Christmas. Now, he is discovering that the can experience that joy everyday. Since he is seeing the mother character now, he begins to paint her. He even paints a nude picture of her in the window of his store...in colour. However, the change that brings him great joy also comes at a great price. The citizens of Pleasantville aren't pleased with his blatant display of immorality, and ironically, they break the window and trash the store.

The value of change is also demonstrated when Jennifer is the sexually aggressive partner instead of the male. She persuades her date to take her to Lover's Lane, when in 1950s culture, the roles would have been reversed. Other aspects of the couple's date inspire a wave of change throughout the school, which the film depicts as exciting. The most modern feature is that the film makes everyone's actions look so innocent.

**Symbolism**

Don Knotts, an actor from the Andy Griffith show, is a supporting character in the movie. His presence is a reference to the fictional and peaceful town of Mayberry. It is apparent in the movie that he has aged and this is symbolic. During the scenes of the film that took place in the 90s, Knotts represented the values of the 1950s. His character was looking for a teenager to visit Pleasantville who would not corrupt it, but he failed at his task, just as the values and norms of the 1950s are no longer appealing to today's youth.

Slowly, the entire town begins to brighten and show colours, even those who were against change. The mayor finally changes colour when he has an outward expression of his anger, and the husband/father when he openly shows his love for his wife and that he misses her. The town experiences rain for the first time, and consequently a full colour rainbow. This is symbolic of how change can seem like chaos at first, but it usually results in something beautiful. At the beginning of the movie, when Jennifer asked what was outside of Pleasantville, everyone was puzzled, but near the end of the movie, busses with names of other towns appeared - another sign of change.

**David and Jennifer**

The change that the film advocated violated many norms and values of the 1950s including morality and the family. At first, the two main characters tried to abide by the norms set by that particular society. David stayed out of trouble, and Jennifer composed herself like a nice girl. However, David eventually got into a fight in order to defend his fictional mother. This was the event that gave him his colour. He was well received because of this act, but when he helped to paint a controversial mural on the police station wall, he was taken to court.

Jennifer gave up the good-girl act very quickly. On her first date, she introduced sex into Pleasantville, and everyone followed her example. Her actions caused numerous people to gain colour and resulted in the restriction of Lover's Lane.

**Minorities and subcultures**

One change that was not introduced was the presence of minorities or subcultures. In the entire film, there is not one person who has an ethnicity other than white, and the majority of these whites are male. The only shred of subculture that could be found is the single woman bit, and as I mentioned before, she was not well received.

**Conclusion**

Although the authorities tried to stop the norms from being violated, their efforts were ultimately useless. Their main agent of socialization, the family, had been contaminated, and teenagers were running amuck. There was indeed a political message in this. Although the people in charge wanted to keep everything simple and morally sound, they were hiding from the complexities of life. The film stressed that change was a necessary part of life, and it shouldn't be feared. This concept can be applied to many issues that the country is facing today. Homosexual marriage, for example, is something that is not traditional, but the writer of this film most likely would encourage acceptance of this view of marriage. The movie taught that just because something does not appear "morally sound" does not mean that it is the downfall of society. The film created a parallel from today's society to the society of the 50s. They people of that decade did not want change, but if change had not come, women would still be oppressed and opinions and non-traditional views would still be ignored.

Change is good. This is the highly promoted value of the film and the underlying political message. Yes, there are consequences to change, but society must trust that the good will outweigh the bad. The writer of this film used a clash of 90s culture with 50s values to illustrate the same clash that is occurring today with new political and social views and mainstream society's political and social views. Many people look back on the 50s as a "kinder, gentler time", but oppression and inequality certainly do not seem kinder or gentler.

**Questions:**

1. Explain how Pleasantville is an example of functionalism.
2. Could any other theories of social change be applied to this film? If so, what theory and how does it apply?
3. Note the differences between David and his sister Jennifer at the beginning of the film. David is shy, conservative, and plays it safe (which is why he loves watching old Pleasantville episodes). Jennifer is a rebel and sexually promiscuous. How do these two personalities change over the course of the film? Why do they change?
4. What is the symbolic significance of colour—especially red—in the film?
5. David (“Bud” in Pleasantville) tries to prevent his sister from changing the Pleasantville universe, and eventually he and Jennifer (“Mary Sue”) argue about it. What does Jennifer believe that David’s real concern or motivation is? Is there any indication that David has changed by the end of the film?
6. Even though David resists changing the Pleasantville universe, in fact he makes changes just like his sister. What changes? What might it mean that David *says* he doesn’t want to change anything, but does anyway? Is he aware that he is contradicting himself?
7. How does David teach the owner of the soda shop, Mr. Johnson, that life doesn’t have to follow a certain pattern, that life *can* be different? How does this insight bring Mr. Johnson freedom, joy, beauty, pain, and even sin?
8. When David and Jennifer first enter Pleasantville, the locals know nothing of a world outside their city. By the end of the film, they see images of other countries on TV. What does this symbolize?
9. The newfound enlightenment which David and Jennifer bring to Pleasantville also provokes crimes and hatred in people who had been so wholesome earlier. Why? How is this paradoxical?
10. What kind of personality or values are symbolized by the mayor of Pleasantville, “Big Bob”? Note several scenes in which the camera is located near his feet, showing his face at an upward angle, so that you see a bright backdrop behind his head: in one scene the bowling score, and in another scene the seal of the Chamber of Commerce. What are these scenes reminiscent of? (Pay attention to what Big Bob says in these scenes too.)
11. At first, Mr. Johnson and Betty Parker (the mother of “Bud” and “Mary Sue”) are clearly attracted to each other, but do not act on it. Then, after both of them have had their eyes opened in various ways, they have an affair. At the end of the film, it is left ambiguous whether Betty remains with her husband or leaves him for Mr. Johnson. Why is this ambiguity important in terms of the lesson of the film? How does it relate to the conversation which David has with his real mother at the very end of the film?
12. Is the writer/director of *Pleasantville* (**Gary Ross**) suggesting that marital infidelity is a good thing that people should do? Why or why not?
13. Is Gary Ross implying that values and stability are unnecessary? Does a character make a decision near the end of the film which suggests that the original values and stability of Pleasantville were actually helpful for him or her?