

Hidden Figures Movie Summary and Analysis Essay

Hidden Figures Movie Summary

Hidden Figures (2016, directed by Theodore Melfi) is a movie that will simultaneously inspire and make people angry at the injustice African-American women face both in professional and daily life. The main characters of Katherine Goble, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan worked at NASA and saw many opportunities for their professional growth; however, their bosses and colleagues did not offer these women support, nor did they respect their dignity since they were all African-American.

Key characters included in the analysis will be Katherine and her supervisor Al Harrison in scenes about “colored” restrooms. Both arguments will build upon Bonevac’s principle of giving a statement first, providing evidence, and then making a conclusion (64). In the essay, two main arguments will be made based on the events described in the movie: While the women’s colleagues at NASA did see the potential in them and tried to eliminate barriers that prevented African-American women from being treated as equal to other members of the staff, the movie distorted some real-life events and painted an image of NASA as an inclusive workplace (run by white men) where women of color could successfully work.

Hidden Figures Analysis

First, NASA’s steps to accommodate Katherine, Mary, Dorothy, and other women of color will be discussed. A crucial scene to analyze in this case is the removal of a “colored bathroom” sign. Invited to contribute to the Space Task Group due to her brilliant skills in analytic geometry, Katherine had to work in a building where there were no restrooms for African-American women.

At the time, such a simple accommodation as a bathroom was highly segregated, which meant that Katherine could not visit any other restroom than for Blacks. Every day, she had to run across the entire campus to go to a “colored bathroom.” When confronted with the question of where she was going every day for forty minutes, Katherine broke down and gave the brilliant “there are no restrooms for me here” speech, in which she mentioned how hard she was working, how low her payment was, and how difficult it became to run half a mile every day just to relieve herself (Melfi).

After listening to her speech, the Group’s supervisor, Al Harrison, decided that it was time for a change and knocked down the “colored bathroom” sign saying, “No more colored restrooms, no more white restrooms [...] We all be the same color” (Melfi). If to use the U.S. Constitution to support the analysis, it is important to mention three specific points: the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution declared an end to slavery, the Fourteenth made the freed slaves citizens of the country, and the Fifteenth provided the right to vote to all races. In this case, it can be beneficial to quote the Fourteenth Amendment: “Nor shall any state deprive any person of life,

liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws" ("14th Amendment").

It is clear that segregated bathrooms limited women's freedom and forced them to comply with the state of affairs that was not fair to them as citizens of the United States. When destroying the "colored bathroom" sign, Mr. Harrison wanted to show that NASA had to step forward and protect the freedom of its employees regardless of their skin color. After this event, male workers became much more tolerant and accepted of their African-American colleagues and even erased some of their previous mistakes, such as placing a "colored" coffee pot that was brought to the Space Task Group's office after Katherine had joined the team.

Distortion of Real Events

If to make a counter-argument to the analysis above, it is essential to mention that the movie was "white-washed" to some degree in order to elevate the role of white people in the struggle for equality in the workplace. Sadly, many events depicted in the movie, including the bathroom scene, simply did not happen. While the film was biographical and followed the real life of Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary, it was also based on a book, *Hidden Figures*, written by Margot Lee Shetterly.

The writer acknowledged that the scene in which the character of Al Harrison knocked down the sign did not occur in real life; moreover, interviews with African-American women who worked at NASA at that time revealed that Katherine Johnson refused to enter colored bathrooms anyway and visited those for white employees, which suggests that the entire scene was made up for achieving a dramatic effect.

Thus, it can be stated that despite the fact that *Hidden Figures* made an attempt to raise the question of racial inequality in such highly regarded institutions as NASA, it did not depict events that occurred in the characters' lives truthfully. Here arises a question of why such a choice was made and why the director decided to give white men a more significant role in the fight for workplace equality at NASA than they actually had. It all goes down to one thing: pleasing viewers. Neither white nor African-American viewers would have liked to see that inequality persisted and that the representatives of the majority did nothing to address it.

It is important to mention that the events in the movie took place three years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which declared that discrimination and segregation were prohibited: "to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and for other purposes" ("Transcript of Civil Rights Act (1964)").

Therefore, it can be concluded that despite the provision of the Civil Rights Act that did not support segregation and discrimination in the workplace, NASA continued to limit the freedom of its African-American female employees on the basis of prejudice. While *Hidden Figures* did a great job of depicting inequalities, the attempts of the movie to distort the real image were, first of all, disrespectful to the women who had to work under oppressive workplace rules that hindered their success and productivity.

Hidden Figures Movie Review

Hidden Figures is a brilliant movie that sheds light on the issue of workplace inequality and the barriers that African-American women had to overcome to achieve success. The film should be praised for the dramatic depiction of events and powerful monologues that relate to the struggles of women of color. However, despite the dramatic effect, the real-life events in Katherine Goble's, Mary Jackson's, and Dorothy Vaughan's lives were distorted in order to elevate the role of white men in the battle against inequality while in reality the women were still limited in their powers and could not enjoy the same freedoms that their colleagues had.

Works Cited

Bonevac, Daniel. "Making Moral Arguments." *Focused Inquiry True Stories Narrative and Understanding*, edited by Hayden-McNeil, Hayden-McNeil, 2015, pp. 64-71.

["14th Amendment."](#) Law Cornell, Web.