

Film Analysis: *Remember the Titans*

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Racism has been a major issue in society for centuries, one that persists even today. Though racism is now not as blatantly systematic as it was during the days of slavery in the 1800s, racist prejudice and discrimination are still alive in the modern world. Take, for example, the numerous, infamous police shootings against unarmed and surrendering Black men in the United States, some of which were streamed or posted on websites like Twitter for the whole world to see, uncensored. The issue of racism sometimes appears to be inescapable; when society takes a step forward, such as the election of the first ever Black president in the United States, society seems just as ready to take more steps back, like electing a president that is obviously and openly racist towards all kinds of minority groups. It is unclear when, or even if, the struggle of racism will ever end, but the world has come far since the times of slavery, and it should be possible to progress even further. This idea was brought to life in the 2000 motion picture *Remember the Titans*, a story of a Virginia town integrating its high school, and the football team, and the issue of facing racism head-on that follows the integration of the Black and White groups of town.

Remember the Titans primarily tackles issues regarding racism and discrimination. In the film, two segregated schools are closed and integrated into one, and the initial head coach, Bill Yoast, who is White, is forced to hand down his job to a Black man, Coach Boone. Football is everything to this small Virginia town, and many White citizens and students are furious that their beloved Coach Yoast is being ushered out of his job- and being replaced by a Black man, no less. However, the two coaches agree to work together, and the White and Black students are forced to work together on the football team, much to the kids' and the rest of the town's anger. The film then addresses the issues of racism that follow, like the different races getting along on

the team, and a conspiracy to get Coach Boone fired so Coach Yoast can be head coach once again. Other scenarios of racism are also brought up, like Black kids being refused service, or White kids not associating with other White kids because they are friends with Black kids. Over the course of the film, the kids eventually all begin to get along and see each other as equals and brothers. As the football team continues to win games, the rest of the town grows to appreciate each other as a singular unit as well. Despite resistance from some members of the team and other outside forces, the kids and eventually the rest of the town stay unify in victory, and stay strong in the face of tragedy. The overall message of the film is that although prejudice can be strong and hard to overcome, education and a common objective can allow people to overcome their prejudices and work together towards a singular goal, and see each other as equals in the process. This is essentially a description of the contact hypothesis, and the film shows this theory in action from the beginning.

Blaine (2013) writes “the contact hypothesis says that physical contact with a member of negatively stereotyped group lessens the negative beliefs and feeling we hold about that individual and improves our attitudes and feelings toward the group as a whole” (p. 231). In other words, the contact hypothesis states that being around members of a negatively stereotyped group will lead to understanding of the group, and decrease negative prejudice towards the group altogether. In the film, this appears to be exactly what happens; two groups that negatively stereotype and have negative feelings towards one another, eventually grow to treat each other as brothers after extensive time with each other. However, it is not exactly that simple, and the film shows that, as well. The groups did not get along at all initially, with fights both physical and verbal busting out frequently. There are other requirements for the contact hypothesis to be effective. “First, this personal interaction should ideally be with an out group member of equal

status” (p. 231). “Second, sustained personal interaction with an out-group member reduces negative beliefs and feelings when that interaction is cooperative” (p. 231). “Finally... goodwill does not generalize to the whole group unless the individual is seen as representative of the group” (p. 231). These three statements are all required points for the contact hypothesis to be effective. In the film, though, it appears that these points were all fulfilled. First, both the White and Black kids were of equal status, as they were all students/football players, and they were all of similar ages. Second, the team was working towards the same goal: winning football games. While competition did exist, there was one overall objective for the whole team, which allowed the kids to unite around a singular goal. The third point is not as quite as easy to make clear; Blaine adds, regarding the third point, “When out-group members, unprompted, reveal personal information about themselves, they are seen as more trustworthy” (p. 231). In the film, the entire football team was ordered by Coach Boone to get to know each other, particularly members of different races. Although that would mean each team member was prompted to talk about themselves, the kids eventually had more emotional, occasionally heated, discussions that would not be considered “prompted,” which could be evidence that the third point of the contact hypothesis was fulfilled, as well.

Remember the Titans was extremely effective in facing the issue of racism. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the film was how it used strong emotions to get the viewer to feel and empathize with the characters in the film. The way the events in the film panned out felt very real (perhaps because it was based on a true story), and seemed very relatable. In the beginning, the characters experienced a massive change in their lives with the integration of segregated schools, leading to high tension for members both races. Later on, the members of the football team all become great friends, calling each other brothers, but the path for them to become

friends was full of fights, disagreements, anger, and overcoming prior prejudice. As the viewer watches that entire change from the beginning, I think it allowed the viewer to understand what the boys were going through on both sides. Later on, this emotion and empathy becomes even stronger when tragedy strikes and Gerry gets in a car accident that paralyzes him. The ways these events are portrayed, and the way that the characters respond to them, make the viewer feel like the characters do. It hurts the viewer not only to watch as Gerry nearly dies, but also to see how Julius and the rest of the team respond to Gerry's accident. Then, in the end, when the Titans win the State Championship, the viewer feels the excitement and happiness not only to see the boys win, but also to see Gerry ecstatic for his friends, and to see two groups who once believed they were so different achieve ultimate success as a single unit. Empathy and emotion are powerful tools for filmmakers to utilize and, for a topic such as this, to give the viewer such an honest and emotional view of the problem and a possible solution is, in my opinion, a very effective way of going about it. However, empathy can only go so far.

Although not necessarily a weakness of the film, I want to state that *Remember the Titans* cannot make the viewer feel empathy for the oppression of Black citizens in America on the level of slavery. I do not want to make any drastic statements like that. It would be difficult for a film to truly make viewers feel what it was like to be enslaved, but that certainly was not the objective of this particular film. One actual weakness of the film, however, would be the predictability of the events. Once again, maybe this can be attributed to the movie being based on a true story, but it is pretty obvious from the first few minutes of the film what is going to happen; the team and the town are going to, for the most part, move past their racism for the success of the high school football team that ends up winning state as the first and only integrated school in Virginia. In some ways, this predictability can hinder the effectiveness of the

aforementioned emotion the movie can make the viewer feel. After all, it may not evoke as much emotion if the viewer already believes or knows that the team is going to make it through any and all adversity they face. Of course, this is a pretty cynical viewpoint to take, but one that should be taken into account. Not all viewers will experience the movie the same way, and while some critics might say *Remember the Titans* is an emotional ride that handles racism effectively, others may call it a typical, predictable, “feel-good” movie. Relying on emotion only may not be effective for all types of viewers, though I would say that this movie handles the topic in a very intelligent way, as well.

The struggle with racism is one that still persists in the modern world, and the story of *Remember the Titans* shows that although America has made progress, there is still much more progress to be made. There were people who resisted integration throughout the entire film, and just like back then, there are people who refuse to acknowledge or accept change today. One example would be the people who say they want to “make America great again.” What exactly does that restoration of “greatness” entail? Does it mean reversing the progress that American society has already made? Regardless, there are still many more Americans willing to embrace change, just like there were in *Remember the Titans*. Perhaps the greatest lesson that one can take from *Remember the Titans* is that whatever differences between Blacks and Whites there may be, one thing is true for both groups: they are all human in the end, and when that fact is finally realized, everyone is stronger for it.

References

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