

Things Are Not Always What They Seem: *Where the Crawdads Sing* Film Analysis

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*Where the Crawdads Sing*, the 2022 movie based on the 2018 novel of the same title, is a mystery/drama/romance/thriller four-in-one story. If this movie were to be given a tagline, something along the lines of “Don’t judge a book by its cover” would be fitting. I chose this movie for a few reasons. One, I like the story. I read this book over the summer, and I was really excited when I heard it was being adapted into a film. The storytelling is phenomenal, the setting is gorgeous, and I lost myself in it when I watched this movie. The reason I chose to write about this movie for this class specifically is that I feel like it shows a few key concepts from our book, *Understanding the Psychology of Diversity*, by Blaine & Brenchley in 2017.

The movie follows Kya, a young girl that lives all by herself in the hidden country of the marsh. Watchers follow Kya as she falls in love with two different boys from the nearby town, is put on trial for the murder of one of them, and finds her “purpose in life,” so to say. The overarching themes of this movie are that things are not always what they seem, and just because it looks good or bad does not mean it is. Multiple scenes depict discrimination due to race, socioeconomic status, gender, and so on. Time and time again, these scenes show that the mainstream way of thinking is not only wrong at times but harmful to the out-group of people shown. It is a movie for the underdogs, the underestimated, and the marginalized. We see Kya and other characters push against the boxes their societies have put them in, and prove stereotypes wrong. It shows that anyone is capable of anything, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or the color of their skin, and that oftentimes, things are not what we think they are at first glance.

The first scene in the movie that shows concepts from our textbook is when Kya goes to school. After being told about school, and the free lunches offered there, by a lady at the store

she and her dad were at, Kya decides to try it out. She is at an age where she should be able to read and write, but because her family is poor and her mom and siblings left her, she has no schooling background. It is obvious from prior scenes that she is mostly going for the free meal offered, highlighting her low socioeconomic status. She finds an old skirt from her mom's or sisters' closets and starts the trek into town from where she lives in the marsh. She is dirty, barefoot, and does not come close to fitting in with the other kids in her class. Her teacher asks her if she can read and write, and makes her try to spell "dog." When Kya fails at this, her classmates laugh at her, call her names, point out her lack of bathing, and Kya runs out of the classroom to never come back. This scene depicts stereotypes against students of low socioeconomic status and how that affects their performance in school (Blaine & Brenchley, 2021, p. 213). Based on her classmates' comments about her, which range from "swamp rat" to "She probably lives in the mud," they do not believe in her ability to do well in school. They think that because she is poor, does not live in town, and does not have access to the everyday amenities they have, she is stupid, stinky, and not worth their time. This belief about Kya is also highlighted by the way her teacher speaks to her in this interaction. Similar to elderspeak, her tone of voice is loud, slow, and adds emphasis to all of the syllables (Blaine & Brenchley, 2021, p. 196). This also shows her teacher's lack of confidence in her academic abilities. Because Kya is part of the out-group in their town (the poor, those who do not live in the main part of town, and those who are not white), nobody thinks she is capable of doing anything good. She has become a social outcast simply because of where she lives in relation to everyone else and because she is poor. After the scene at school, Kya talks about how that was the only time she ever went to school. Her peers' and teacher's beliefs about her became a self-fulfilling prophecy for a time because she did not learn how to read or write until much later when a nice boy and

childhood friend named Tate taught her (Blaine & Brenchley, 2021, p. 44). A self-fulfilling prophecy is when our expectations of a person causes them to act in such a way that confirms those expectations (Blaine & Brenchley, 2021, p. 44). Because Kya's peers and teacher did not think she belonged in school or would do well in school, she quit going. This also emphasizes stereotype threat, which is when someone faces doubts about themselves and their abilities when other people believe negatively about them (Blaine & Brenchley, 2021, p. 211). This stereotype threat led her to want to disidentify her want for self-improvement from academic achievement. She did not even last a full day before she let their preconceived notions about her intelligence affect her behavior and she quit trying to prove them wrong. Later in the movie, after Kya has learned to read, she becomes a successful author who writes and illustrates books about the wildlife in the marsh she grew up, effectively beating the self-fulfilling prophecy and stereotype threat she fell into as a child. The biggest point to Kya for beating the negative stereotypes she is constantly surrounded by, whether it be an attack on her morals or intelligence, is beating the murder trial she is faced with and not getting convicted, even though she is the one who committed the crime. She did not internalize the negative stereotypes thrown on her once she got into adulthood, even though they affected her as a child.

Another theme in this movie that is depicted in a few ways is the sexist society the characters live in. At one point in the movie, Kya and Tate get lost in a bout of passion for each other. However, Tate stops it from going too far, telling Kya that it is dangerous for her and he cannot be "damaged" as easily as she can. This highlights the cultural differences between genders, and also points out that women can be "damaged" and their social image ruined for having sex, while men are protected from this. In a way, Tate is expressing benevolent sexism through his attempt to protect Kya (Blaine & Brenchley, 2021, p. 124). He believes Kya is more

fragile than he is because she is a woman, and also casts himself in the role of protector by not having sex with her even when they both want to. He sacrifices his own desires to protect her fragility and shows some of his own sexist beliefs through that. Juxtaposed to this situation is Kya's relationship with Chase Andrews, who, rather than seeing Kya as something to be protected, sees her as something to be exploited and used to satisfy his own desires. Where Tate sacrifices his desires to protect Kya, Chase guilted Kya into sex regardless of her hesitancy with it. He whispers promises of a future with no intention to fulfill them. While Kya has eyes only for Chase, he is engaged to another woman and sees Kya only as a side piece, or something to increase his social status among friends as he has "wooded" the marsh girl. Chase's actions reflect more hostile sexism, which is a concept that sees women as sex objects and not much more (Blaine & Brenchley, 2021, p. 124).

While this movie covers many more topics than I can discuss here, some of the main ones are beating negative stereotypes and gender stereotypes. *Where the Crawdads Sing* shows that Kya is not one to be beaten down by anyone's beliefs about her, and she even goes so far as to prove them all wrong by outsmarting an entire town and getting away with murder. It is a beautiful movie that shows that what we see at first glance is not always accurate, and we should never underestimate someone based on our own stereotypes or prejudices against them.

References

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