

## "Far From Heaven"

The 1950's in America have come to represent a time when "all was well" with the country and its people. The post-war middle class generation was settled into suburbia. The mother was home tending to the house and children, and the father was the strong, responsible breadwinner. Children actually obeyed their parents! This is the picture that I have always had of that time period. Perhaps reruns of TV shows like "Leave it to Beaver" and "Father Knows Best" ingrained this sort of view. Director and screenwriter, Todd Haynes, comes along and completely strips away that facade of "all is well". His collaboration with his cinematographer and musical composer creates a work that strips away the layers and reveals the souls of three people and a community. The truth turns out to be very far removed from the bland, contented, happy life that we first see on the screen. Haynes's film, "Far from Heaven" was released in the US in 2002.

Julianne Moore is Cathy Whitaker, Dennis Quaid is her husband, Frank. Dennis Haysbert is the other main cast member, Raymond Deagan.

The film zeros in on a well-to-do community in Hartford around 1958. Cathy Whitaker is the epitome of the perfect homemaker, mother and wife. She is very well liked and admired in her community. She is the understanding and loving wife of Frank Whitaker, a very successful businessman who deals with sales and marketing. She is the mother of two children. Cathy seems to juggle all her roles effortlessly. Frank appears to be the hardworking corporate man, who doesn't seem to have a lot of time for his wife or family, but then everyone appears to understand that he is "very busy." Raymond is the college-educated son of their "colored" gardener. He takes over his deceased father's

good start.

well-written

work, and also owns and runs a small garden shop. <sup>HP</sup>The lives of all three main characters change abruptly when Cathy accidentally discovers that her husband is homosexual.

Cathy innately recognizes that her life with Frank has been an illusion of happiness. She begins to see the contradictions within her circle of friends. She turns to an outsider,

Raymond, to develop a caring relationship that also has an undercurrent of sexual tension. After Frank admits that he cannot go on living a lie because he has truly fallen in love for the first time, ~~with another man,~~ Cathy's life begins to change dramatically.

She seems to emerge from the cocoon that was her world, and begins to see the real world that surrounds her--a world full of hypocrisy, racism, and plain old meanness. ✓

Raymond is the center of her longing for love, for physical fulfillment, and for a new freedom. Yet, this relationship that could truly free her is not really possible in the place and time that she inhabits. *and*

It is this particular place and time--1950s America-- that this film exposes to our scrutiny. The film is a love story that is tender and very fragile in a repressive setting that makes it all the more moving for the viewer. I believe that Haynes wants less to entertain

than to move the viewer to go beyond a simple sympathy for Cathy, Raymond, and Frank. He wants the viewer to see how a society's attitudes, including racial and sexual taboos can harm and hurt the individuals right to a fulfilling life. ✓

Because the time and place is an essential component of the storyline, one of the most successful aspects of this film is the director's ability to bring to life the 1950's ✓ setting of this story. Everything is perfectly detailed. The clothing and hairstyles of the women --Cathy's huge circular skirted dresses, her perfect little hats--evoke an era and yet seem not to be "costumes". ✓ The houses are full of the furniture that was so specific to ✓

*more thought be a hand on the 50s)*

that time--the sweeping, long couches, the Danish Modern tables and chairs- and that gave an overall feeling of "togetherness", but not of warmth. The use of the Hartford community as the setting also is important. The town is lovely in the autumn with all the colorful leaves and the first shot of the film evokes that feeling of idyllic beauty. The viewer almost expects to see that the movie was made in 1957. This setting is only the top layer of this film. Haynes wants us to realize later on in the movie that the beauty we saw concealed a lot that was not so beautiful in this community.

Have you seen a Douglas Sirk movie?

Along with the setting of the film, the musical score is also very reminiscent of the 1950's. It sounds like music that accompanied a lot of melodramas, love stories of the 50's era of films. The music evokes the same sense of recognition that the style of hair and clothing produced. It also carries the plot along on its notes. The music tells us what to expect.

Perhaps the strongest theme in the film deals with a type of spiritual imprisonment that all three main characters face. Cathy is imprisoned at first by her role as the perfect wife to a man who cannot be a real husband, and later she is imprisoned by the racism in society that will not allow her to go with the man she loves. Frank is imprisoned by his self-loathing at first because he sees himself as a diseased man, and later because society's sexual taboos will not let him live openly and honestly. Raymond is imprisoned by both the white and black society's racism and must choose between the woman he loves and a life of safety and stability for his beloved daughter.

The acting in this film is one of its greatest strengths. Julianne Moore brings Cathy to life. She is the unflappable, perfectly dressed community leader who has a way with everyone in every situation. She is perfect in everything she does, from the table

settings to the cocktails, yet there is an air of fragility and almost naivete. She assumes the best in everyone. Moore's portrayal moves beautifully from a woman living a fairytale life, to a woman who sees her world shatter. Her hope ~~is~~ that the marriage can be saved is so sad to see, because we do see it in her eyes. The tightness that Cathy has to maintain with her family and friends dissolves when she is with Raymond. Moore literally opens up as a different Cathy when she looks at Raymond or asks him to dance with her. The final scene at the railroad station, where there is no dialogue, is a beautiful example of what Moore conveys just with her face. Her costar, Dennis Quaid, also has the character of Frank well defined. He is the self-confident businessman, too busy to really do more than acknowledge his family, but Quaid lets us see the self-hatred and fear behind this façade. When Frank finally breaks down and acknowledges his fears, our hearts go out to him. Dennis Haysbert as Raymond exudes gentleness and understanding. The obvious sexual attraction he has for Cathy is softly portrayed, and his masculinity is a sharp contrast to Frank.

"Far from Heaven" is a film that I would give a four star rating to because it moves beyond a love story and examines themes in our society that are universal, that we must still deal with today. It does so with wonderful acting, beautiful cinematography, and a very well written screenplay.

Excellent  
easy.  
well-written - simple  
+ straight forward.  
sympathetic portrayal of movie  
+ its characters  
Good analytical points.  
Nicely woven together.  
A.