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SOME THOUGHTS ON *PRECIOUS: BASED ON THE NOVEL PUSH BY SAPPHIRE*

David Hennessee

Precious: from the Latin *pretium* (price). “Of great value or high price.”¹

Last winter break, while visiting my family in Grapevine, Texas, I was surprised to see *Precious* on the bill at the local multiplex. My sister JoLynn and I saw it on Christmas Eve day. We hadn’t heard a lot about it—just some buzz about its being “gritty” and “powerful” and produced by Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey. We weren’t prepared for just how gritty and powerful it would be. My sister and I aren’t film experts, though we do see a lot of movies. We agreed that *Precious* was unlike any film we’d seen before, and we couldn’t quite explain why. What follows is an attempt to understand what, for me, made the experience of watching *Precious* so singular, moving, and disturbing.

The film’s eponymous heroine, Claireece “Precious” Jones, is a sixteen-year-old, obese, inner-city African American girl facing her second pregnancy resulting from rape—by her father—with her mother’s knowledge and consent. Precious’s first child was also a product of incest; this toddler with Down’s syndrome lives with Precious’s grandmother. Precious’s mother, ironically named “Mary,” treats Precious like a servant, constantly belittles her, and physically abuses her. At one point she throws a television set down a stairwell, narrowly missing Precious. It’s discovered that Precious is barely literate, so she is sent to an alternative school. There, with the help of a caring teacher, she not only learns to read and write, but begins to discover a semblance of self-esteem.

A pivotal scene occurs early in the film at this school when the reading teacher asks the class to describe how they feel, right at that moment. Precious can only manage to say

“Here. I feel here.” On one level, this monosyllabic response shows how beaten-down and non-verbal Precious has become through years of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. But in another way, this response marks the beginning of Precious’s journey. For much of the film, she escapes the unbearable conditions of her life through elaborate fantasies in which she imagines herself a model, singer, or actress, adored by fans and photographers. Alternatively, she escapes into binge eating—in one scene, she steals and eats an entire bucket of fried chicken. As played by Oscar nominee Gabourey Sidibe, Precious is impassive to the point of being robotic; her face is an impenetrable mask of absence. So for Precious to say she feels “here” shows that she is finally present in her life—a necessary first step toward changing it into something resembling a life. The rest of the film narrates the painful, awkward, often hard-to-watch, unsentimental struggle of Precious beginning to believe in her name.

This journey forms the emotional center of the film, and I will return to it later. In some ways, though, I think that I was moved almost as much by the film that Precious *isn’t* as by the film it is. As a teacher, I have a pet peeve about movies that sentimentalize the profession and portray teachers as martyrs. I’m thinking of films (e.g. *Dead Poets Society*, *To Sir with Love*, *Freedom Writers*) that feature a group of misunderstood or disadvantaged or abused young people whose lives are transformed by The Teacher Who Goes Above and Beyond. Of course, good teachers do care about their students and sometimes go above and beyond what they are paid to do. But the solution to problems with education today is not for every teacher to don a hairshirt of martyrdom; for example, to emulate Hilary Swank’s character in *Freedom Writers*, who works three jobs to buy her students books and supplies. This sentimentalization of education ignores systemic problems of poverty, racism, and abuse—not to mention chronic underfunding of schools, low salaries, and poor working conditions for teachers. Such portrayals of education are, to me, actually dangerous because they persuade the public that the solution to an institutional problem is not to reform and properly fund the institution, but just to make its inmates love each other more. This is Dickensian morality for the 21st century.

Precious doesn’t fall into this trap. Her teacher and social worker are there to help her, but they aren’t saviors or martyrs. They’re not even portrayed as exceptional. The adults who help Precious are presented simply as competent, caring professionals doing their jobs. One scene that encapsulates this aspect of the film occurs when Precious leaves her abusive home situation and stays with her reading teacher. Precious learns that her teacher is a lesbian; she sings in a church choir; she has a life outside her devotion to students that is fulfilling; and this life is balanced with her career.

Additionally, as the teacher and her partner relax after work and discuss subjects outside Precious’s understanding, Precious’s internal monologue shows her sense of confusion, wonder, and admiration for these adults who have shown her kindness and have

some things in their lives that Precious is just beginning to see as possibilities for herself. In this scene and others, *Precious* does not fall into another very common narrative pattern of films portraying adolescence: that of the teenager who knows-it-all versus hapless, out-of-touch adults. I'm thinking of the films of John Hughes (*The Breakfast Club*, *Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*), older films like *The Graduate*, or more recently, *Juno*. *Precious* is, of course, a very different film from these, but given its mainstream success, its presence in multiplexes, and its being touted as a "must-see" film, comparisons are perhaps not totally inappropriate. As entertaining and well written as these other mainstream films can be, they feed adolescent narcissism by showing young people an idealized image of themselves; they are smarter and wiser than the clueless adults surrounding them; they are always ready with a pithy, sarcastic remark; they are fully prepared for life but held back by an arbitrary and pointless system. This oversimplified view of adolescent experience works against real understanding and exchange between parents, teachers, counselors, and young people by representing them as living in an us-versus-them environment. *Precious* has every reason to mistrust adults, and there are many points of conflict between Precious and the adults who try to help her. However, the film presents these conflicts as opportunities for growth and connection, not as symptoms of a permanent, unchangeable generational divide.

One exception to this pattern of understanding between generations occurs in the final scene between Precious and her mother Mary. Precious's social worker (played by Mariah Carey) broaches the topic of abuse. The scene ends with Precious repudiating Mary's desperate attempts to atone for the past and reconnect with Precious. Some things, this scene suggests, are unforgiveable. Yet to me, and perhaps due to the strength of Oscar winner Mo'Nique's acting, Mary comes off here not as a one-dimensional, monstrous villain, but as an even more chilling portrait of a thoroughly broken, beaten, morally bankrupt little girl inhabiting a grown woman's body. Her pleading refrain of "who was gonna love me?" is simultaneously a pathetic rationalization of her actions, a *mea culpa*, a cry for help, and a heartbreaking sign that she may be beyond help.

Many critics have taken issue with the film, and Mary's portrayal in particular, as signs of cinema's continuing tendency to reinforce negative stereotypes of African Americans.² Institutionalized racism forms the unexamined, unremarkable background for *Precious* in what I assume to be the filmmakers' effort to make Precious's story universal. However, this effort does erase the issue of race from critical scrutiny, reifying, and naturalizing pathological behavior that in truth results from specific historical, political, and economic conditions. Without examination of those conditions, stereotypical portrayals like Mary's risk being perceived as universal truth, i.e. "of course black women are like that." To be fair, the film does contain several positive portrayals of African Americans: Precious's teacher, social worker, a nurse played by Lenny Kravitz, and many of

Precious's classmates. This is a vexed topic, however. To paraphrase *The Celluloid Closet* (a documentary on Hollywood's representation of gays and lesbians), movies tell the culture what to think of minorities, and they tell minorities what to think of themselves. Therefore, the stakes of minority representation are high. Moreover, telling any story well requires walking a line between the universal and the historically specific, and I worry that *Precious* has been welcomed into the mainstream because it errs on the side of universality, with some racist stereotypes intact.

Still, as there was a place for *Precious* in the alternative school, I'm glad there is a place for *Precious* in the multiplex. Its presence on the marquee next to *Twilight: New Moon*, *Did You Hear About the Morgans?*, and *Avatar 3D* represents change. And unlike her mother Mary, *Precious* changes. She is not beyond help; she asks for it, and she gets it from a number of caring adults and teens. In telling this part of the story, the film avoids another common narrative pattern: that of a protagonist who faces an enormous amount of adversity but overcomes it singlehandedly through will and effort. We're familiar with this narrative from Horatio Alger, whose boy heroes achieve success through "pluck and luck." This narrative is dangerous in that it uncritically promotes "American dream" mythology, sentimentalizes poverty, and ultimately reinforces complacency in the audience. That is, the audience is invited to think: "if this character can overcome obstacles, anyone can. Therefore, if someone is poor/disadvantaged/oppressed/abused there's no reason they can't pull themselves up by their bootstraps." Moreover, this narrative does not invite a compassionate response; it does not suggest that we enter as fully as we can, through imagination, into the protagonist's world and try to understand his or her pain as pain. Rather, it suggests that we feel good about a character's struggles because they ultimately are overcome. We are seduced into feeling lucky that we don't have it so hard, and flattered that if we did, we could overcome difficulties just like the character. Thus, rather than compassion, audience complacency is generated.

Despite its implication in stereotype, *Precious* works against a complacent response. It is not a "feel-good" movie. When asked to describe the movie, my sister and I repeatedly said that it was "hard to watch." This uncomfortable viewing experience comes from many factors: the harrowing subject matter; the gritty, realistic filmmaking; the honest, unsentimental acting. Moreover, *Precious* disturbs because of the way it presents *Precious*'s suffering and growth into self-acceptance. The film avoids narrative patterns that depict suffering as an essential component of identity formation (e.g. "that which does not kill me, makes me stronger"). Kristin Boudreau, in an essay on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, identifies two such patterns that valorize pain: "European romanticism and African American blues."³ The romantic view is summed up by Keats: "Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A

Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!”⁴ Romantic experiences of suffering as soul-making are essentially private, depending on what Wordsworth called “emotion recollected in tranquility.” By contrast, the blues tradition “expands into a public realm what had hitherto been a private experience of suffering, taking the individual outside of himself and his private pains.”⁵ Both traditions suggest that pain can be transcended through its transformation into art. The danger, as Boudreau argues, lies in taking the pain out of suffering, making suffering a thing that it is not: “If one claims... that suffering makes one fully human, might not this very assertion glorify the pain traditionally deployed against the enslaved body and mind?”⁶ Romanticizing pain, “we take the dangerous risk, in Emerson’s words, of ‘courting suffering’ in order to verify our humanity.”⁷ Building on Elaine Scarry’s work on torture, Boudreau proposes that *Beloved* suggests a different view of pain: “suffering... unmakes the self and calls violent attention to the practice of making and unmaking selves.”⁸

For me, what ultimately made *Precious* so affecting was the way it forced me helplessly to witness the violence of Precious’s self being unmade and the painful process of her being pasted together again. There was nothing soul-making about the abuse Precious endured: her experiences did not make her stronger; her suffering was not the necessary precondition of romantic transcendence into a fuller selfhood. Her suffering was unnecessary, criminal, completely damaging. What happened to Precious was totally fucked up. No one should have to endure that level of degradation, the film argues, and if one does, the only way to rebuild the self in its wake is to ask for and accept help. Precious’s mother serves as an example of what can happen to those who don’t. She remains self-exiled in her apartment, lost in television shows, dancing alone, enslaved by self-loathing, unloving and unloveable. She exemplifies James Baldwin’s thesis on suffering:

Most people had not lived—nor could it, for that matter, be said that they had died—through any of their terrible events. They had simply been stunned by the hammer. They passed their lives in a kind of limbo of denied and unexamined pain.⁹

Precious, unlike her mother Mary, faces that pain and begins to move beyond it. As we trudge the road of recovery with Precious, we are compelled to experience what Morrisson writes in *Beloved*: “anything dead coming back to life hurts.”¹⁰

Still, having come to this conclusion about the film, and despite my best efforts to understand its themes, characters, and narrative patterns, what escapes me is a sense that I can—or can ever—really understand the pain it represents. I’m forced to embrace the paradox Morrisson notes at the end of *Beloved*. Like that novel, *Precious* is “not a story to pass on”¹¹—it is a story that must be told, and one that can’t fully be told. And finally, I’m left reflecting on another painful paradox, one expressed by the film’s title. “Precious” means “of great value or high price.” It’s inspiring to witness Precious begin to realize her

great value. Simultaneously, I can't forget that Precious, and too many young women like her, are made to pay too high a price. ☹

Notes

- 1 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precious>
- 2 For example, see Felicia R. Lee "To Blacks, Precious is 'Demeaned' or 'Angelic'" http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/21/movies/21precious.html?_r=1
- 3 Kristin Boudreau "Pain and the Unmaking of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Contemporary Literature* XXXVI 1995. 448
- 4 Quoted in Boudreau, 448.
- 5 Boudreau 449.
- 6 *Ibid.* 459.
- 7 *Ibid.* 462.
- 8 *Ibid.* 452.
- 8 James Baldwin. *Another Country*. New York: Dell, 1962. 112.
- 10 Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf 1987. 55
- 11 *Ibid.* 275.

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