

Precious: A view of Harlem through a very narrow lens

Helen Halyard
8 December 2009

Directed by Lee Daniels, screenplay by Geoffrey Fletcher, based on the novel Push by Sapphire

Precious follows the life of Claireece “Precious” Jones, a teenage girl living in Harlem in New York City in the late 1980s, as she learns to read and write and begins to tell her painful story. She is kicked out of school when the administration learns she is pregnant for a second time, and told to attend an alternative school.

A teacher at the latter school patiently coaches the seriously damaged girl to read. She encourages her students to write about their lives in journals. In this way, the shocking facts, which constitute the life story of Precious, begin to emerge. A similar set of journals forms the raw material for Sapphire’s novel, *Push*, published in 1996.

Precious has been physically and verbally abused by her mother, raped repeatedly by her father, and treated cruelly in the neighborhood because of her weight. Her two children are products of incest. The first, born when she was only 14, suffers from Down syndrome.

The social reality is appalling and deserving of treatment, but director Lee Daniels’s presentation of the story and of life in Harlem in general lacks any real insight into the horrific circumstances confronting this oppressed young girl.

Even before *Precious* opened nationwide on the weekend of November 20, the film had received a massive amount of publicity, including a favorable feature in the October 25 Sunday *New York Times* magazine. With leading roles played by popular stars such as standup comic Mo’Nique as the abusive mother, for example, Mariah Carey as the social worker, and Paula Patton as the alternative school teacher, the film was more or less guaranteed a wide following. Gabourey Sidibe plays the lead as the obese

teenager.

The film received an audience award when it first screened at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, and then previewed at the Cannes festival. Lions Gate Entertainment purchased distribution rights; Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry served as producers for an additional boost at the box office. This was an establishment-sponsored film. (Leading up to the 2004 elections, director Daniels, at the request of “Harlem neighbor and former president Bill Clinton,” produced public service announcements seeking “to inspire young people of color to vote.”)

Does its success and notoriety mean that *Precious* is a great film? Does the movie offer an important understanding of society’s, or any individual’s, complexity? Or does it provide an accurate picture of life in Harlem, a well-known area of New York City with a rich history? The answer to all these questions, unhappily, is no.

The film opens in the economically devastated Harlem of 1987, when the neighborhood was afflicted by a major crack cocaine epidemic and high unemployment. We first meet Precious as she is having fantasies of herself as a movie star. These fantasy scenes occur throughout the film and shed little light on Precious’s inner life.

Precious’s mother Mary uses her daughter and grandchild to obtain money from the welfare department. After having the second baby, Precious leaves home to live in a halfway house and begins to speak openly to the social worker (played by Mariah Carey) about her mother’s abuse.

The depiction of Mary is particularly pernicious. She is the epitome of the “Welfare Queen,” an image that has been used by both Republican and Democratic Party administrations alike to criminalize poor people

and justify cuts in welfare and other social programs.

Mary is not a human being. She is a monster. Rather than explaining the social relations that produce such extreme forms of backwardness as hers, *Precious* obscures the causes and sensationalizes the results.

A more thoughtful (and socially critical) film might have probed the relations between the population and its environment, posing such question as: What happens to communities when masses are denied meaningful employment, crowded into filthy ghettos and stripped of any sense of self-worth? Is there no connection between the monstrous behavior of individuals at the bottom of the social heap and a society in which a few at the top have so much?

It is simply false and libelous, as Daniels's film does, to suggest that the vast majority of even the more oppressed layers of people who live in Harlem are merely brutal and degraded.

Both the movie and the book upon which it was based underscore some of the difficulties in contemporary cultural life and its crisis of perspective. In the early part of the twentieth century, during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, for example, many novelists and poets described the oppressed conditions of life, but did so from the standpoint of *fighting* economic and social discrimination. The artists were inspired by the international struggles of the working class, particularly the October Revolution of 1917. In today's art world, dominated by wealth and privilege, many directors are either overwhelmed by the social conditions they see or at any rate see no possibility of their being changed. Society is presented as a collection of individuals—the beautiful and glamorous, and everybody else.

Reading *Push*, one is hard-pressed to find any explanation, or serious consideration, of *why* such conditions in Harlem exist, or their history and development. While Sapphire's intention may have been just to tell a story, as she asserts in interviews, a definite outlook emerges and it is one that accepts the social status quo. The only way out of wretched conditions is through the determined action of the individual.

The events and circumstances described in both *Push* and *Precious* are terrible, but it is the writer's or director's responsibility to make something artistic and enlightening out of even the worst circumstances, instead of this surrender to backwardness that will

delight the right-wing ideologues who argue that the poor are poor because of their moral and intellectual inferiority. The filmmakers cannot see the woods for the trees.

We see the horrific conditions of poverty on the big screen and, instead of making any useful sense of them, the filmmakers present the most grotesque and offensive details. There is no question that life in Harlem during 1987, or for that matter in 2009, is miserable, but this is not the first time in history that artists and filmmakers have been confronted with dreadful circumstances. In world literature for at least the last century and a half (and, in the more recent period, filmmaking), the exposure of unbearable living conditions has played an important role. Many artists were involved and animated by left-wing ideas and saw their work as part of the process of social transformation. There is none, or very little of that here in *Precious*.

It is the task of the artist not merely to “show what is happening” (Sapphire's words, in an interview), but to offer an interpretation, and a critical one at that.

At the end of the movie, we learn that *Precious* contracted the AIDS virus from her father, who has died. We see her walking down the street with two kids in hand among a sea of people. What is the message here? Somehow *Precious* might work things out, but life in Harlem will remain the same.



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