

Exploring Themes of Nature and Grace in Terrence Malick's 2011 film

Tree of Life.

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The Tree of Life by Terrence Malick is a 2011 film that presents a question of whether nature and grace are intertwined or if they exist separately. The film portrays nature as life and death, whereas grace is seen as the beauty and elegance of life. The film is set in Texas in the 1950s and centres around a family with three boys.¹ The middle son, R.L., dies at the age of nineteen, leaving the family wondering about his death and questioning their faith along the way. The audience witnesses the oldest son, Jack, grappling with the death of his brother and struggling to find peace, happiness, and harmony as an adult. This essay will examine how nature and grace are dependent on each other.

The overarching theme of the film is nature and grace, how they interact with and depend on each other and how they represent something larger in the world. Death is a natural part of life; it is nature, whereas grace is the beauty and peacefulness in death. The opening monologue by the boys' mother, Mrs. O'Brien, encompasses all that nature and grace are trying to be within the movie:

The nuns taught us there are two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself.

Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults, and injuries. Nature only

¹ "The Tree of Life=L'arbre de la vie." Mount Royal University Library, accessed December 16, 2023, https://mtroyal.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/delivery/01MTROYAL_INST:02MTROYAL_INST/12241206150004656?lang=en&viewerServiceCode=DigitalViewer

wants to please itself. Get others to please it, too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it, when love is smiling through all things. They taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end. I will be true to you. Whatever comes.²

Mrs. O'Brien is the film's example and definition of grace; she is the elegance between life and death. She is the only one who talks about nature and grace and shares her view with her children. After the death of oldest son, she starts questioning nature and grace while her other two sons ask themselves the same questions. Mr. O'Brien, the father, does not seem to confront the same moral questioning or hardship after the death of his son as his wife and children do. The way both parents grieve the death of their son is different but similar. They both examine their beliefs in a way — Mrs. O'Brien questions her faith in God, and Mr. O'Brien questions himself and his actions toward his son.

Mrs. O'Brien walks the path of grace while her husband walks the path of nature. They contrast each other through their parenting styles, but as a couple they seem to connect and thrive in their marriage. They have differences and argue but their marriage and love seem strong and linked. When their relationship becomes strained from parenting clashes and their son's death, the audience witnesses cracks and rifts form. Their relationship is mirrored in the relationship between nature and grace; they are connected, laced, and loved, but not without gaps in their foundation. There is a stark contrast between the parents when waking up their children. Mrs. O'Brien wakes her sons up by putting ice on their feet and back³; the scene is marked by sunlight, laughter, brightness, playfulness, and above all, happiness. When Mr. O'Brien wakes up

² Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Entertainment One Films Canada Inc., 2011), film, 0:02:31.

³ Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Entertainment One Films Canada Inc., 2011), film, 0:55:57.

the children, there is a change from light and cheerful music to darker, more ominous music. The scene opens with the darkness of the hallway: the sun is not as bright but still provides light, and the music does not start till the children start getting out of bed, and they seem to be more grumpy and tired.⁴ The change in music continues throughout the sequence between the father and sons. Not only does the audience view the change between mother and father, but the audience also gets to hear the change in music.

The audience can see and feel the contrast between nature and grace through the relationship between Mr. O'Brien and Mrs. O'Brien. It is very easy to pick out the examples of contrast and friction between their relationship because there are many examples, and it is straightforward in description. It is difficult to find examples of their relationship showcasing co-dependency because it requires the audience to contemplate and analyze their relationship.

When Mr. O'Brien gets woken up from his nap by Jack slamming the front screen door closed, he makes Jack open and closes the door quietly fifty times while Jack counts out loud.⁵ Comparatively, in a scene in which young Jack throws blocks at his mother and the infant R.L. in a fit of jealousy after R.L. is first brought home, Mrs. O'Brien merely tells him sternly to stop, which he does.⁶ These examples not only show their parenting styles, but also how they need each other to balance themselves and provide a home that is both patient and tough. That interdependence is mirrored by that of grace and nature — they need one another for balance and harmony. Nature and grace in *The Tree of Life* are only good when they are together; only then are they most powerful.

⁴ Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Entertainment One Films Canada Inc., 2011), film, 0:59:19.

⁵ Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Entertainment One Films Canada Inc., 2011), film, 1:00:15.

⁶ Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Entertainment One Films Canada Inc., 2011), film, 0:44:13.

A good example of when nature or grace being separated results in a negative outcome is when Mr. O'Brien leaves for a work trip for a couple of days. At first, the scene is chaotic and happy, it encompasses the old saying, "when the cat's away the mice will play," because that is what the children are doing: playing and having fun. The children bring a lizard into the house, which Mrs. O'Brien is not happy with. She seems to react playfully at first, until she reaches a point where she becomes uncomfortable and tells them to stop and to remove the lizard from the house. They remove the lizard, but it is also clear that the children do not listen to her when their father is not present. Their actions only escalate from there when Jack vandalizes an abandoned house and sets off a skyrocket with his friends. Jack gets in trouble with his mom, but his only concern is whether she will let his father know what he did. Jack's worst offence is breaking into someone's house and stealing a woman's nightgown. Jack tries to hide the nightgown but ends up throwing it into the river due to panic and fear.

It is through those scenes that Jack realizes how much nature dominates him, and how little grace he has. It is also at this moment in the film that Jack decides that nature is evil. Jack also struggles with the conflict and power struggle between nature and grace. He does not realize that nature and grace do not need to wrestle and struggle for control; they can co-exist and thrive within him. He does not have a good example of someone showing such peace and harmony to him as a child or as an adult, so he does not understand their co-dependence.

Jack is the product of nature from his father while R.L. is the product of grace from his mother. Nevertheless, they are inseparable, bound closely as siblings,, but it goes beyond that--the audience does not see their relationships with the youngest brother. We can see their relationship starts to mirror the relationship of their parents, in that they are interdependent, and need each other for balance and protection.

A contrast can be seen in a scene where the family is eating lunch at the kitchen table and Steve laughs and snickers at something Mr. O'Brien says. Mr. O'Brien tells Steve to leave the table, which he does, but Jack is still at the table smiling when Mr. O'Brien asks if he also wants to leave the table.⁷ Mr. O'Brien says to Jack, "are you going to continue to defy me?"⁸ At the end of the scene the audience sees Mrs. O'Brien looking disheartened at Jack and even reached out to touch his arm for comfort.⁹ Mrs. O'Brien knows the way her husband is treating the children is wrong, yet she does nothing but console them when they get yelled at.

Around this time in the film, the audience views Mrs. O'Brien speaking less during family meals and starting to look at her husband in a different light. She is unhappy with the way Mr. O'Brien is treating the children, and it shows on her face, but she continues to try to see the good in him. This is the first of many breaks in their relationship that do not get fixed but rather ignored or covered up.

Another contrast is what Mr. O'Brien says about Mrs. O'Brien to their children after church one day:

Your mother's naïve. It takes fierce will to get ahead in this world. If you're good, people take advantage of you. Every one of these top executives, you know how they got to where they are? Floating right down the middle of the river. Don't let anyone tell you there's anything you can't do. Don't do like I do, promise me that. I dreamed of being a great musician. I let myself get side-tracked. When you're looking for something to happen, that was it. A lie, you lived it.¹⁰

⁷ Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Entertainment One Films Canada Inc., 2011), film, 1:07:22.

⁸ Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Entertainment One Films Canada Inc., 2011), film, 1:07:23.

⁹ Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Entertainment One Films Canada Inc., 2011), film, 1:07:44.

¹⁰ Malick, *The Tree of Life*, 1:00:45.

It is clear that Mr. O'Brien does not share the same outlook on the world and life as his wife, and he says things that undermine his wife's perspective. Mr. O'Brien fits into the definition Mrs. O'Brien mentioned at the beginning of the film; he only wants to please himself and sees the world as a harsh place. Mrs. O'Brien fits into her definition of grace; she accepts being ignored by her husband and ignored by her family when her husband is not around.

It is clear to the audience that the parents do not see eye to eye in terms of the world around them and how the other person goes about expressing themselves. This can be paralleled with Jack and R.L. as children.

Halfway through the film the perspective changes into a story of nature and grace throughout time, the birth and death of dinosaurs, and the life of the world with plants and trees. The scene opens on a dinosaur injured by a river, another dinosaur walks up to the injured one and contemplates whether or not to kill it. The dinosaur is having its own moral dilemma since it is its nature to kill the injured dinosaur, but grace urges to let it live, which the dinosaur eventually does. The segment ends with a view of the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs. The glimpse of dinosaur life shows how a world of nature contains grace within it and beauty that only comes when grace is present. The scene also shows how individuals and even dinosaurs can have both nature and grace, and it is up to them to decide what route they want to continue with. The scene is very similar to the monologue Mr. O'Brien delivers toward the end of the film when he confesses to having lost faith and grace. Mr. O'Brien says, "I wanted to be loved cause I was great. A big man. I'm nothing. Look at the glory around us: trees, birds. I lived in shame. I dishonoured it all and didn't notice the glory. I'm a foolish man."¹¹

The Tree of Life by Terrence Malick (2011) is a masterpiece that showcases how nature and grace are interdependent. This film is unique in portraying nature and grace as vastly

¹¹ Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Entertainment One Films Canada Inc., 2011), film, 1:59:39.

different yet intrinsically interconnected. Each person and creature on Earth has the ability to choose nature or grace. If someone chooses to walk in nature it does not mean they will walk in nature their whole life — choices and minds can change and evolve to bring together nature and grace. One must walk in both paths to maintain the relationship, harmony, and balance of nature and grace.

Bibliography

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