

I was one of the youth touched by *Glory* when it was released. At that time, I was a high school student living in a suburb of Detroit, MI and was beginning to realize that my history courses were telling an ethnocentric, male-dominated view of history rather than including minority voices as it represented perspectives of events. I felt then-- and still believe --that the film *Glory* expresses historical content in a meaningful way and conveys the significant role that the African Americans of the 54th Regiment played in influencing the tide of the Civil War's outcome from a more balanced perspective than was previously presented to the viewing public.

As I viewed the film this time around, it was with the tools of analysis provided in Robert Brent Toplin's essay, "Cinematic History as Genre." The storyline of the film is compelling and clearly organized around a simple set of events presented in three clear stages: Act I --which sets up Shaw in the problematic position of commanding the 54th, Act II --which explores the many complications of training, supplying, understanding, and leading such an unusual regiment, and Act III --which pits the regiment up against Fort Wagner's formidable defenses to test Shaw and his troops' resolve and courage. This structure follows a familiar pattern for viewers and therefore frees the viewer up to focus on the nuances of the relationships between the soldiers as they are tested by circumstances. Also, the film employs a common technique in the historical fiction genre pointed out by Toplin which creates a few, composite characters to follow. This provides the viewer a simplified, fictionalized sampling of some of what may have occurred during this historical period. By following the members of a single tent consisting of a sharp-shooting stutterer (Sharts), angry run-away (Trip), preachy father-figure (Rawlins), and well-read

free man (Thomas Searles); the viewers see and experience --in an almost tangible way -- the Civil War's conflicts as each of these principal characters evolve. Trip is the epitome of this transformation at the campfire the night before the assault on Ft. Wagner when he eloquently acknowledges the importance of the 54th as being the only family he's ever known and then muses aloud, "Not much matter what happens tomorrow, 'cause we men ain't we?" (*Glory*). The viewer understands that he has found self-respect and has earned the respect of those whom he values and is a changed man as a result regardless of the outcome of the ensuing battle. Another important technique the film succeeded in using was the use of its main character's (Shaw) narrative to hook the reader's interest from the beginning when we hear his letter to his mother as an introduction to both background about the war and his character. This storytelling technique threads throughout the film in the form of both letters home and his crucial dialogue with other characters. In addition, an effective set of images and sounds accompany these aforementioned techniques and were worthy recipients of the Academy Awards received for the soundtrack and cinematography. While hearing Shaw's opening letter, viewers see images of many historical aspects of the Civil War to provide broader background such as the countless tents of the union soldiers, the row upon row of marching troops in route to --or engaged in --skirmishes, and the contrast of the serene landscape upon which the battles were won or lost and the restless men moving upon it. We hear the blasts of the artillery fire and historically important battlefield communication tools like drums and bugles. The viewers' emotions swell during numerous visual montages of aspects of the war as we hear the pure, angelic voices of the Harlem Boys Choir soaring with strains of hope or despair to emphasize the director's interpretation of the

events as they unfold. I recall after seeing the film in high school that I was so moved by the film that I taped a version of the sound track.

Although I thought the film was extremely effective, I also think that had the creators made the film a more accurate reflection of the actual historical characters and events it could have been more true to history without likely sacrificing revenue or popularity. While viewing the DVD special edition's special feature, "The True Story of Glory Continues," I learned that the first members of the 54th were "deeply religious and highly literate." I agree with James M. McPherson's criticism in his essay, "The 'Glory' Story" that there was a missed opportunity in trying to convey a broader trend about the enlistment of many former slaves and portraying in the film a fictional cast of characters rather than telling the story with the historically significant members of the 54th including Fredrick Douglass's two sons Charles and Lewis and the carpenters, barbers, and farmers who were free and engaging in the war for a higher and longer-lasting impact (27).

I see potential for using this film in the classroom as a powerful supplemental tool to provide a minority voice of Civil War events as well as to provide students with audio and visual impressions that media conveys well. I think *Glory* is useful in providing students with an emotional connection to the core issue of the war: the fate of the African American slave.

Works Cited

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