



# The Tree of Life – Way of Nature, Way of Grace

**F**ilms today are often formulaic and superficial, entertaining perhaps but lightweight and forgettable. Few aspire to become works of art. Rare is the movie that can actually be called art. Terence Malick's *The Tree of Life* is such a film. Like an impressionist painting, it needs to be savored and studied. Critics have used grandiose terms to describe it, such as epic, awe-inspiring, a masterpiece, Malick's magnum opus; yet others have called it ponderous, pretentious, and boring. Clearly, it is not a middle of the road film. Rather, it is a slow almost philosophical-theological meditation on human life and mankind's place in the universe.

With such monumental themes, the film needs a grand scale. And Malick delivers this. Although he tells the story of a mid-20th century Texas family, he bookends the plot, (what there is of it) between an almost wordless segment, showing the origins of the universe up to the dinosaurs and a similar segment showing the end of the universe. One critic sees the film as a symphony, with these segments as movements, illustrating the progressive structure and nature of life. Certainly, the expansive sweeping montage of the construction and deconstruction of the heavens is humbling. In a way, it brings to mind the opening of Stanley Kubrick's 2001 *A Space Odyssey*.

Unlike most American directors, Malick is non-prolific. Since his first feature in 1973 (*Badlands*), he has directed only four other films (*Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, and *The Tree of Life*) in the intervening 38 years. That's one film every 7.5 years! Yet each has the

distinctive Malick approach, characterized by long shots of nature, views of trees (including a gargantuan 65,000 pound live-oak featured as the titular tree here), upward glances towards the heavens, vivid images rather than extensive dialog, and elliptical editing. All of these are present here. Indeed, the dialog is virtually non-existent, depending more on short softly whispered voice-over sentences to add meaning to the images on screen.

The main story is centered on the O'Brien family. Father (Brad Pitt) and Mother (Jessica Chastain) have three boys, with Jack as the oldest. The film moves in a fragmentary, almost narrative-free fashion between this family in the 1950s and Jack as a grown man (Sean Penn) today, focusing on his journey through life. The innocence of his youth is impacted by two major factors: the loss of one brother and the difficult relationship with his father.

The younger Jack, played fabulously by Hunter McCracken, is caught between two opposing views on life. His

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mother comments, "There are two ways through life: the way of nature, and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow." Mother represents grace and father represents nature, and this is played out in front of Jack in his daily routine, from how they rouse him from bed (one playfully with ice cubes, the other by swiftly pulling the sheets back) to how they expect him to react at dinner.

The way of grace is the way of God. Mother whispers, "Grace doesn't try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries." How reminiscent this is of the great love chapter in 1 Corinthians:

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Cor. 13:4-6)*

Despite veering towards caricature, Mother characterizes mothers everywhere, whose love is evident in their familial relationships. The way of grace is the way of self-giving, of loving as Christ loves (Eph.5:25).

The way of nature, on the other hand, is the way of man, epitomized in Father. As Mother points out, "Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way." Again, this reminds us of a biblical parallel, something Jesus told his disciples: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them." (Matt. 20:25) Man lives competitively, wanting to be top dog, fighting fiercely for a bigger piece of the pie. This is even the advice Father gives the young Jack.

When his brother dies, Jack feels the pain of grief which is compounded by the struggles he experiences in his relationship with his father. Cutting between the young and the grown Jack, Malick shows us how these have deeply impacted the adult. Penn has almost no dialog, yet his morose facial expression tells the whole story. His ponderous gazing over the glass and steel structures that man has created (and he is an architect so has had a hand in some) leaves him cut off from the present, still reflecting on a past that was unforgiving.

The older Jack philosophizes, "Father, Mother. Always you wrestle inside me. Always you will." Neither has won. Both seek full reign. And in the midst of this conflict, there is no peace for Jack. The truth is, "The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by." And his life, like his father's has flashed by, leaving him in a mid-life crisis of his own.

The beauty of the film lies in its emotive power. By focusing on characters and not story Malick draws us in, without setting a plot goal. The film takes its time bringing out meaning, much like life. We need to live with the O'Brien's, experiencing something of the life of their children before we can empathize with the older Jack. By using cameras positioned at a child's eye level, we see as if we were children, too. And the lack of speech forces us to be in the picture, seeing not listening, imagining what it was like, feeling their pain. It is not entertaining, it is hard work. But it is worth it, as it causes us to reflect on our own relationships.

Malick, though, is an Episcopalian, and brings the bigger question of man's relationship to God and his place in the world to the center of this film. He opens the movie with a quote from the book of Job: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" (Job. 38:4) The middle movement, focused on Jack, is linked to the opening and closing scenes of the universe. Though not narratively connected directly, they are thematically complementary pieces. They allow Malick to show us man's place in the universe. We were not there when God formed the heavens. We may not be there when he brings it to an end. (Though we hope to be with him in heaven enjoying eternity in his presence, through the work of Jesus Christ.) We live brief lives in between these two epic events, humble yet glorious. As David said to God in one of his psalms, "what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psa. 8:4)

Yet there is a glory that God wants us to see and enjoy even as we live out our seemingly empty lives. The imagery of the film depicts this glory in everything around us. Toward the end, when Father realizes the error of the way of nature, he comments ruefully, "I dishonored it all. Didn't notice the glory." He has spent his life fighting to win and he failed to enjoy the glory around him. We can be like this, if we are not careful. The old maxim, stop and smell the roses, points

