**“A Dramatistic Critique of Waiting to Exhale”**

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**Abstract**

This exploratory study seeks to ask what does the audience gain and/or lose when the director’s vision differs from that of the author. I have posed this research question because the film left out several valuable pieces of information to help the audience fully understand the characters and their motives. The scope of this project will include articles and reviews about the book and movie of the same title (*Waiting to Exhale*), as well as the author (Terry McMillan) and the director (Forest Whitaker). The scope will also include my analysis of the book and the movie. I will not only compare and contrast the perspectives of the reviews, but I will include my perspective in the comparison and contrast as well using Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic criticism and method. Due to the extensiveness of both the film and novel, I have chosen one scene representative of each leading character. Using Burke’s dramatistic pentad method: agent, act, scene, agency, and purpose (who, what, when, where, and why), will help me answer my research question, what does the audience gain and/or lose when the director’s vision differs from that of the author?

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**Chapter One:**

**First Breath: An Introduction**

**Type of Project:** Research Paper

**Subject:** “A Dramatistic Critique of Waiting to Exhale”

**Research Question:** What does the audience gain and/or lose when the director’s vision differs from that of the author?

**Statement of Problem**

Terry McMillan is a successful American author. She achieved much national attention with her third book, *Waiting to Exhale* in 1992. It was a huge success, remaining on the New York Times best seller list for several months. McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* is an important book because it is characterized by relatable female protagonists. Since its release it has impacted countless women across the country, especially African-American women. It shed light on the issues of being a successful Black woman trying to find a good Black man. As well as touching on the issues of race, gender, Alzheimer’s, and showcasing the support system of black women amongst each other. In 1995, Forest Whitaker directed the box office hit movie with the same title. At the time of its release, it was the first film ever with four Black women as the leading characters in a Hollywood film. With it now being a motion picture, a wider audience became aware of the issues light was shed on in the book.

**Significance and Purpose**

This exploratory study seeks to ask what does the audience gain and/or lose when the director’s vision differs from that of the author. I have posed this research question because the film left out several valuable pieces of information to help the audience fully understand the characters. That is a major problem seeing as how the audience will have unanswered questions about things and will not fully understand the women’s relationship with each other, why they make the choices they do and/or have, and how their family and background information play a part in it all. I know plenty of people (including myself) who read the book and saw the movie, and took away very different perspectives. I saw the movie first and absolutely loved it. I thought the actors and actresses did a great job and the directing was good. I loved the movie for several reasons: it had an all-Black cast, it addressed the issue of being a successful Black woman trying to find a good Black man, it showcased some of the “typical” stereotypes of Black men, it was told from a female prospective, and it touched on how Black women react to Black men dating white women. When I read the book, I discovered so much more about the main characters, their family, and why they made the decisions that they did. All of the things I found out in the book made me understand the movie even better. When I asked people who had seen the movie *and* read the book, their responses were much like mine as opposed to the people I asked who had *only* seen the movie. My goal for this project is to place a spotlight on both the director’s and author’s visions for the film and book, showcasing the similarities and differences between them, especially the differences. I searched and found only one article that touches on what I am doing. It is written by Bell Hooks and is called, “Mock Feminism: Waiting to Exhale”. In it Hooks does not praise the film for its depiction of Black women but charges that the film masks harmful stereotypes and compares/contrasts the book and film. The difference between me and Hooks is that hers primarily focuses on the film and it’s so called feminist perspective. Granted she gives comparison/contrasts but they are examples leading back to her main point of feminist perspectives. My paper is significant because it is a full comparison/contrast analysis. The results of this exploratory study matters because it could be the determining factor in helping one choose to either read or watch the movie for a better understanding. I will also make a great contribution to the argument that film adaptations of books can be disappointing.

**Scope and Limitations of Project**

The scope of this project will include articles and reviews about the book, the movie, the author, and the director. The scope will also include my analysis of the book and the movie. I will not only compare and contrast the perspectives of the reviews, but I will include my perspectives in the comparison and contrast as well. This way there are several different viewpoints and we will see who agrees, disagrees, and is neutral. Now as successful as the book is, more research exists about McMillan personally than her award winning novel. Although this is a limitation, it works in my favor and it sets my project apart from anyone else who has done this prior to me. It gives me better insight on understanding McMillan as an author, which will help me understand her work better (motifs, writing style, themes).

**Methodology**

This research project that seeks to ask: what does the audience gain and/or lose when the director’s vision differs from that of the original author’s? In this rhetorical analysis of the *Waiting to Exhale* book and box office film, I will use dramatistic criticism as my approach. I chose it as my approach because it answers the empirical question of how a person explains their actions. I will be using the criticism’s method, dramatistic pentad. Kenneth Burke, its developer, says the dramatistic pentad is an instrument used as a set of relational or functional principles. To drama, the pentad is dissolution and also has a similar relationship to journalist’s strong usage of the five W’s and one H (who, what, where, how, and why). However the pentad is done through the five key elements of human drama – act (what was done), scene (where it was done), agent (who did it), agency (how the speaker did it, methods or techniques), and purpose (why it happened). I will use both the book and film as primary sources, as well as reviews I have found on both, and give my own analysis of them both too. The information from the various reviews will go hand in hand with the book and film, clearly tying in my research question.

The first chapter will give a general overview of Terry McMillan and her work, *Waiting to Exhale*,the book. I’ll then give a general overview of Forest Whitaker, director of the box office film. The second portion of the chapter will pose my research question: what does it mean when the director’s vision differs from that of the author’s? What does the audience gain and/or lose? I will then offer an explanation as to why this is important. The third section will discuss the scope and the limitations of this project. Finally, I will outline the methodology and organizational pattern being used in this research project.

In chapter two I will review and discuss the literature of what other scholars have said about the book and movie of *Waiting to Exhale*. What has already been talked about and published will be discussed and what has been said yet will too. With the given information, I will determine as to whether or not the claims in each source compare, contrast, and/or contradict each other.

In Chapter Three I will begin the body of my research paper. It will focus on the novel and on the author’s, McMillan’s, vision. Reviews on the novel will be used as well. I will then discuss my own personal analysis of the book by choosing one scene representative of each character. I will discuss that scene using the dramatistic pentad.

In Chapter Four I will focus on the film adaptation of *Waiting to Exhale*. The content, plot, setting, and characters will be discussed placing an emphasis on Forest Whitaker’s vision as the director. Reviews on the movie will be used here as well. I will then, by leading woman, choose one scene and discuss it using the dramatistic pentad.

In Chapter Five I will compare/contrast the movie and the book and then state my conclusion. McMillan’s versus Whitaker’s vision will be discussed. However, the emphasis will be the scenes chosen for each leading character and what the audience gained and/or lost within it. Emphasis will also be placed on what the audience gained and/or lost when the book was made into a film. That will include casting decisions, missing material from the book, and changes made in the film. Finally I will discuss ideas for potential research on the topic should anyone else want to research it in the future.

**Chapter Two:**

**Hold Your Breathe, What Other Scholars Have Said**

Terry McMillan’s first book *Mama* was published in 1987. In just a mere two years she published *Disappearing Acts. How Stella Got Her Groove Back* was written in 1996 followed by *A Day Late and A Dollar Short* in 2001. Following that up, she wrote *The Interruption of Everything* in 2005. Before writing the previous three novels, her most critically acclaimed and best-selling novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, was written in 1992. She received national attention from this, her third novel, which remained on The New York Times bestsellers list for several months.

Forest Whitaker is an award winning actor, producer, and director has earned a respective reputation for his intensive character study and analysis. In his first solo onscreen performance of note, he had a small role in Crowe’s *Fast Times at Ridgemont High.* In 1986, he co-starred with acclaimed actor Sean Penn in Scorsese’s film *The Color of Money* and Oliver Stone’s *Platoon.* He had his first leading role as musician Charles Parker in the Clint Eastwood film *Bird.* In his most definitive role to date, Whitaker played a bushido-following mob hit man in *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* in 1999. Whitaker’s 2006 portrayal of Idi Amin in the film *The Last King of Scotland* earned him multiple awards including the 2007 Academy Award for Best Actor in a leading role, making him the forth African-American in history to do so. He made his directorial debut with a film about inner city gun violence, *Strapped,* for HBO in 1993. Two years later he made his first feature film, *Waiting to Exhale*, whichwas based on McMillian’s novel. Roger Ebert took notice that the tone of the film was similar to that of Whitaker’s own acting style.

When looking at *Waiting to Exhale*, the one work that these two famed creative artist have in a common, a lot is to be said about both the book and the film version. The book quickly helped to establish McMillian as a force to be reckoned with amongst contemporary female fiction writers. Donnella Canty writes in her article, *McMillian Arrives,* that the novel lived up to the praise she’d heard from her colleagues and that it was one of the most well written, true-to-life books that she’d ever read. She also felt that McMillian’s story-telling strategies and precise command of narrative voice were exceptional.

In an article titled *A review of Waiting to Exhale*, the author didn’t feel quite as taken with McMillian’s rhetorical skills. The article stated that the speech patterns that were used may leave some readers feeling a bit disconcerting. The profane use of derogatory language is one of the novel’s major drawbacks. Canty, however, defends that claim in her article by stating, “The black dialect and voices McMillian uses to tell all of the women’s stories draw readers into black culture.” Another pitfall that the novel suffers due to McMillian’s writing style is its wordiness. The book is 400 pages long. This is unnecessary and according to Paula C. Barnes, author of the article *Review of Waiting to Exhale,* “McMillian tends to over-explain”. This found to be true throughout the entire novel. She took two written pages to write something that could have been written in two paragraphs and meant just as much to the work as a whole, which Barnes states, is a flaw of her early work.

Charles R. Larson, author of *The Comic Unlikelihood of Finding Mr. Right,* agrees with the other writers about McMillian’s writing flaws, but he’s also in agreement with the rest of the authors as to what makes the novel so good, which is the content. Each one of the articles praises the content and what McMillian was able to do with the novel. The richness of her characters and their relationship was a major strong point. Both Larson and Canty agree that “through their struggle, McMillian depicts the bonds of friendship and relationship… [that] adds a number of revealing variations”. In the article *A review of Waiting to Exhale,* the author states that “each character is drawn with authenticity and empathy...” This is a nod that both Larson and Barnes agree with as well.

All in all, the novel does shine in its own way. *A review of Waiting to Exhale* commented on the novel as a whole stating that “it is fresh and engaging”. Donnella Canty explained, wrapping up her piece that, “*Waiting to Exhale* provides a brief glimpse into the talent and capabilities of Terry McMillian”. Paula C. Barnes ended her article stating, “*Waiting to Exhale* is refreshingly funny, but its message is hard-hitting in the end”. Perhaps the most critical, Larson topped off his article by writing, “These aren’t black women; they’re most women at a certain point… and that may make you think about race- if not gender- in a totally different light”.

The film version of the novel has its ups and downs a well. This is Forest Whitaker’s first feature film and one of the problems stemmed from him. Whitaker has worked with some of Hollywood’s best directors throughout his career, but that was as an actor. In a 1996 article from Ken Tucker, he explains, “The most obvious mistakes made by first-time director Forest Whitaker… are that he’s failed to give the movie any sort of narrative drive”. It seems that the movie is comprised of a mass of separate events strung together by the fact that they involve the same characters. Tucker calls it a series of self-contained vignettes, which is exactly how it feels. Just about every scene could stand alone. Roger Ebert, in his 1995 review, stated, “the film resembles his [Whitaker’s] own acting: measure, serene, confident. I am not sure that is always the right tone, however.”

Whitaker has a reputation as being a deeply methodical actor. He brings that same intensity to his role as director. Unfortunately, for this film that doesn’t always work. Ebert writes, “There are times when the material needs more sharpness, harder edges and bitter satire instead of bemused observation”. This is perhaps the most noticeable difference in the movie version. As a reader, all of the satire, irony, scorn, bitterness, anger, etc. is felt. Whitaker, however, tones this down to movies detriment.

The upside to Whitaker’s methodology is that he brought a style to the film that was catching to say the least. David Ansen wrote, in his 1996 Newsweek article, “The mirror that actor turned director Forest Whitaker holds up in *Waiting to Exhale* is a glossy as those Technicolor women’s movies turned out by producers Ross Hunter in the 50s”. One thing that can’t be said is that Whitaker doesn’t do his homework. Godfrey Cheshire agreed, in his review, and wrote, “Even more striking, though, is the opulent look Whitaker applies, which recalls vintage studio pics in its deliberately unreal orchestration of rich colors, operatic lighting and picture-book interiors that have nary a throw pillow out of place”. Whitakers homage to the past was definitely a highlight, but not enough to carry the entire film.

The major down fall for the film was the four maintain characters. First, there was a lot missing from the story that’s found in the book, Tucker took notice of this stating, “he [Whitaker] never makes clear why on earth these women are such close chums. They come from widely different backgrounds and social classes; the only thing they seem to have in common is that they’ve been burned by men”. That’s another grip the critics had, the men. Ansen writes, “The trouble with the movie’s parade of cardboard men isn’t just that they squelch any possibility of romantic interest…” This really hurts the women of the film. Ansen went on to state that they (women’s choice in men) make our heroines seem foolishly adolescent for pursing them. This makes you question the creditability of these women, but is that not authentic to real women? The critics were not so swayed by the authenticity, though.

One thing that shone through for the film is the cast. They all gave wonderful performances, under Whitakers direction. Ebert wrote, “The movie does work. I was never bored… when Bassett coolly dealt with the firemen after torching her husband’s car… I got a glimpse of energies that could be unleashed in this material”. Ebert isn’t the only one to find Bassett’s performance above par, Tucker wrote, “Bassett, so superlatively steely… softens her tone here to convey Bernadine’s disappointment, but she also revs up a terrifically vindictive rage as she gets her revenge for Hubby’s disloyalty”. Whitney Houston also received kudos for her cool, detached portrayal of Savannah from Ansen.

In all, there is a bit of substance lost in the film, but it’s replayed by wonderful cinematography and strong acting, under the direction of Forest Whitaker. Critics, along with the box office, agreed that the film is entertaining. Tucker calls it an exhilarating blast and Ansen felt that it wasn’t just a holiday entertainment, but it was an oasis in the middle of the desert. Giving credit to Whitaker, Cheshire wrote, “Whitaker’s acting background surely underpins the consistent strength of the ensemble…” In my opinion, both the film and the novel rise and fall in their own respective right.

**Chapter Three:**

**Waiting to Exhale (Book)**

**McMillan’s Vision**

I think that one of McMillian’s visions for the novel was to bring awareness to the African-American community on several levels. It uplifts the community by talking about Black art, Black love, and places an emphasis on Black females in a manner that has never been done before, especially showcasing the importance of friendship. It shines a light on the things in the community we see but may not pay attention to anymore for whatever reason. Those things are drugs, relationships, health issues, racism, homosexuality, class, and interracial dating. The book allows these four strong women to tell their stories and all of them are relatable on some type of level. The best part is the fact that women can relate but see that other people go through the same things as well. With seeing that, Ansen says that Black women started having book clubs and opening up about the things that they were once afraid to discuss. The book made the Black community comfortable to finally discuss these things and/or question them. I believe that was the purpose of it all, to get the community talking and thinking about the things they either didn’t want to, were afraid of, or just simply didn’t care to dicuss.

**Personal Analysis (Using Dramatistic Criticism)**

**Savannah Jackson**

“For the last three years, my life has felt inconsequential, like nobody really gives a shit what I’m doing or how well I do it. From the outside, everything looks good: I’ve got a decent job, money in the bank, live in a nice condo, and drive a respectable car. I’ve got everything I need except a man.” – Savannah (p. 2)

**Agent:** Savannah Jackson

**Act:**  She takes a seat at a table full of couples, and then because she feels disrespected and upset, she gets up and leaves the table (p. 17).

**Scene:** It takes place at the New Year’s Eve party after she sits at a table full of couples.

**Agency:** The men welcome her to sit and the women glare at her for doing so.

**Purpose:** After sitting at the table and seeing the women glaring at her, Savannah became upset. She thought this: “I wish I knew why some women are so damn catty or feel threatened by the presence of an unescorted attractive woman… The way they were sizing me up, you’d swear I was wearing a sign that said: Hell, yeah! I’m single and desperate and I have no morals and as soon as you turn your back or go to the bathroom, I’m going to flirt with your man and try to take him... I hope I never get this insecure” (p. 17).

**Gloria Matthews**

“Gloria wanted to know what being in love felt like; she’d read about it in magazines, seen it on TV, heard Robin rant and rave about how some man had made her feel good and how Russell made her toes curl. For a long time, Gloria wanted her toes to curl but they never did. It finally got to the point where she got tired of waiting for love and divided all of her attention among God, hair, and her son” (p. 71).

**Agent:** Gloria Matthews

**Act:** Gloria wants Tarik’s father, David, to spend the night again like he did the last time he came.

**Scene:**  It takes place at Gloria’s house in the living room.

**Agency:** She informs David that Tarik is not home and she isn’t expecting him until the morning. Gloria also tries to get him to stay the night with her and David tells her that he’s Gay.

**Purpose:** Gloria’s was trying to express affection. She hadn’t had sex with anyone since David’s last visit. She was tired of feeling lonely and hoped he would oblige her like the last time.

**Robin Stokes**

“My numerology book says that I’m too decentralized and will have a tendency to fight to express myself, because I’m always going to meet opposition. It also said I might want to consider changing my name in order to get a better vibration, because I’ll never be able to “see the woods for the trees” as long as I’m a five. But I can’t do that.” – Robin (p. 42)

**Agent:** Robin Stokes

**Act:** Robin and Russell get into an argument because he and his wife haven’t signed the divorce papers.

**Scene:** In Robin’s apartment bedroom one night (p. 302).

**Agency:** Robin communicates to him that they won’t have much time together if he’s still trying to settle things with his wife.

**Purpose:** She says this not only because he’ll be trying to get everything in order with his wife, but because she’ll be leaving the weekend to go stay with her parents for a week in Tucson.

**Bernadine Harris**

“She looked over at her husband, thinking she had wanted to be rid of him… to feel that sense of relief when the single source most contributing factor to her uttermost source of misery was gone. But he beat her to the punch. Not only was he leaving *her*. Not only was he leaving her for another woman. He was leaving her for a *white* woman.” (p. 26)

**Agent:** Bernadine Harris

**Act:** After she read James’s letter that he sent her she cried (p. 332).

**Scene:** It was raining and Bernadine was in bed. She hadn’t been feeling well the past week because she was having a hard time grasping the fact that her husband was now married to another woman. Because it was raining she wished she had someone there to console her. Then she thought of James, as she often did when she was lonely (amongst other things), and the night they shared together. She was still lying in the bed thinking of him when her daughter brought her the mail. There was a letter from James.

**Agency:** She sat up in bed and read the letter James wrote her. As she read the letter her daughter kept asking her questions.

**Purpose:** Bernadine cried because she was happy and felt good. She loved the words of the letter. This is an excerpt of it: “I know you probably thought that night was just something frivolous but like I told you before I left, it meant more to me than that. Much more. I buried my wife back in August, and for her sake, I’m glad she’s not suffering anymore… I want to see you again Bernadine, and not for another-one-nighter, either. If there’s any truth to what’s known as a ‘soulmate’, then you’re as close to it as I’ve ever come… I’m not interested in playing games, or starting something I can’t finish. I play for keeps, and I’m not some dude just out to have a good time… I knew I was in love with you long before we ever turned the key to that hotel room. I’m not asking for you to make me any promises or any kind of commitment. All I’m asking is if you’d be willing to explore this relationship further” (p. 337).

**Chapter Four:**

**Waiting to Exhale (Film)**

**Whitaker’s Vision**

I believe that Whitaker’s vision for the film was to place emphasis on the most important aspects of McMillan’s novel: the women’s relationship and desire to find Mr. Right. I understand that with the extensiveness of the novel and the time constraint that comes with films, some things had to be taken out. I agree with Roger Ebert that the film was just like his acting— serene, confident and measured. His vision for the film uplifted what Black women wanted out of Black men and what they looked for in relationships. Hearing the thoughts of the women throughout the film plays a big part because it allows the audience to understand what they are going through from that specific character. I think that his overall purpose was to showcase not only the positive but the negative things as well that take place when pursuing relationships. All of the women were connected in different ways individually and cohesively. Having said that, I believe it was Whitaker’s purpose as well to showcase the importance of friendships between women and the bond that holds them together.

**Personal Analysis (Using Dramatistic Criticism)**

**Savannah Jackson**

**Agent:** Savannah Jackson

**Act:** After sitting down at a table full of couples, the women give her dirty looks. She agrees with them mentally, and then walks away shortly after.

**Scene:** It took place while sitting at a table at a New Year’s Eve party.

**Agency:** Because of the looks the women were giving her, she gave them a facial expression that agreed with their thoughts, letting them know she was capable of doing what they were thinking.

**Purpose:** She felt like the looks the women were giving her were right. She thought: “Hell yeah! I’m single and desperate and I have no morals and as soon as you turn your back or go to the bathroom, I’m going to flirt with your man and try to take him.”

**Gloria Matthews**

**Agent:** Gloria Matthews

**Act:** Gloria wants Tarik’s father, David, to spend the night again like he did the last time he came.

**Scene:** It took place at Gloria’s home in her living room.

**Agency:** She informs David that Tarik is not home and she isn’t expecting him until the morning. Gloria also tries to get him to stay the night with her and David tells her that he’s Gay.

**Purpose:** Gloria hasn’t had sex with anyone since David. She’s been feeling lonely and hopes that he’ll oblige her like he did the last time he came.

**Robin Stokes**

**Agent:** Robin Stokes

**Act:** Robin and Russell get into an argument because he and his wife haven’t signed the divorce papers.

**Scene:** In Robin’s apartment bedroom one night.

**Agency:** Robin communicates to Russell that they won’t have much time together if he’s still trying to settle the divorce with his wife.

**Purpose:** It is never clarified as to why they won’t have much time together. Robin and Russell get in the bed and go to sleep angry with each other.

**Bernadine Harris**

**Agent:** Bernadine Harris

**Act:** After she read James’s letter that he sent her, she cried.

**Scene:** It was raining outside and Bernadine was sick in bed. Her daughter brought her the mail and she saw that she had a letter from James.

**Agency:** She sat up and read the letter. As she read the letter her daughter asked her numerous questions.

**Purpose:** She was smiling, crying, and happy. The letter made her feel good. An excerpt from the letter is as follows: “I’ve waited a long time to contact you. I’ve been thinking about you every day Bernadine. Every day, all the time… Bernie I fell in love, in one night. You know what’s hard for me to understand? What I feel for you has never undercut the love I have for my wife. How is that possible? I watch her every day. So beautiful and brave. I just want to give her everything I’ve got in me. Every moment. She’s hanging on, fighting to be here for me. And when she sleeps, I cry. Over how amazing she is, and how lucky I’ve been to have her in my life… Even if this never finds you and we never speak again, you’ve…changed… my… life.”

**Chapter Five:**

**To Breathe or Not to Breathe: Comparison/Contrast of the Book & Film/Conclusion**

**McMillan’s vs. Whitaker’s Vision**

I think that McMillan’s book and Whitaker’s film were both good. They parallel but place emphasis on different things in their respective works. With McMillan, her vision covers places emphasis not only the women’s friendship and what they want from men but it gives a deeper insight into the positive and negative aspects of the black community. With Whitaker directing the film, time was valuable, so he had to focus solely on the women’s friendship and their hopes of finding Mr. Right.

**What Does the Audience Gain and/or Lose?**

Overall, I think that the audience loses more than it gains with Whitaker’s vision differing from McMillan’s. In the film Whitaker focuses only on the women’s relationships and search for Mr. Right. The film may give quick glimpses but does not give enough in depth background information about the characters for the audience to truly understand their past and present motives. In the next section I discuss missing material, the casting decisions, and changes made that harmed the film. One of those sections discusses how the women’s friendship wasn’t convincing in the film and at times unbelievable. Another discusses central character traits that weren’t included in the film and how it took away the essence of the character. The biggest gain for the audience is seeing the film. With the film being a box office hit, it’s a fact that people wanted to see this novel made into a film. The leading women were an all-star cast and most of the men as well. Whitaker did a good job with directing and bringing out the best possible film for his vision.

**Savannah Jackson**

I was very disappointed with this scene in the film because it took away from Savannah’s character. Whitaker’s vision truly portrayed her as desperate, inconsiderate, and willing to sabotage another’s relationship for her own personal gain. In the book, according to McMillan’s vision, that is exactly what she was against. In that scene she was saying that women, especially Black women, need to trust each other more. There is no reason why a woman should think that every time she’s out with her man, every other woman is out to try and take their man or sabotage their relationships.

**Robin Stokes**

In the scene with Robin and Russell, they began to argue after he returned several hours later from speaking to his wife about signing divorce papers. Robin is upset because that was his sole purpose of going over there and she begins to think that he slept with her. In the novel, prior to Russell getting back, she speaks with her mother on the phone and agrees to go home to Tucson for a week to help her out with her father who has Alzheimer’s. When Russell gets back and she finds out everything, she tells him they won’t have much time together because she’ll be going home for a week. In the film, she doesn’t let him know that she’ll be going home for a week the coming weekend. Yet, she does tell him that they won’t have much time together. In the film scene, the audience loses valuable information. They don’t know why Robin and Russell won’t have much time together. Like I did prior to reading the novel, they’ll most likely insinuate that it’s because he’ll be trying to work the divorce out with his wife. The truth is they won’t have much time together because Robin is going home for a week to help her mother with her father, which the audience knows nothing about. That valuable piece of information could have been slipped in with one sentence or a short scene between Robin and her mother.

**Gloria Matthews**

I liked this particular scene with Gloria because it is a side of her that you don’t see at all in the book. Granted, she talks about sex and fantasizes from time to time, but you never see her in action. This is a good scene in the book but an even better one in the film. With Whitaker’s vision, the audience sees how she expresses another flirty side of herself through the actress Loretta Devine. You see how eager she is to stop David when he gets up to leave and her flirtatious and womanly side when she blushes and invites David to spend the night. Finally, you see the shock on her face when David says that he’s gay and he’ll be checking out literally and figuratively if he doesn’t hear from Tarik by a certain time. It’s a really good visual of bringing out all of those elements from the book that the audience read and can now see captured on film.

**Bernadine Harris**

After having read and watched the scene of Bernadine reading the letter that James sent her, I realized that she was crying for different reasons. In the novel, the letter that James writes to Bernadine is heartfelt and passionate. He tells her that his wife passed and he’s glad that she’s at rest so that she won’t have to suffer anymore. He goes on to let her know that, even though he loved his wife, she is the closest thing to a soul mate that he has ever come close to. What they shared that night wasn’t just a one night stand, it was much more. Bernadine cried because the man whom she had been thinking about constantly, who made her feel beautiful and sexy, happy and content, is confessing his love for her and wants to explore a relationship with her if she wants. McMillan’s vision in this letter places the emphasis on Bernadine, her happiness, and the possibility of exploring a new relationship with James, the man who loves her. In the film, Whitaker’s vision shifts the emphasis of the letter by placing the emphasis on James’s dead wife. Granted, James says that Bernadine was an inspiration for him, he’s been thinking about her constantly and that he did fall in love with her in one night. But, the letter changes because he says, “What I feel for you has never undercut the love I have for my wife. How is that possible?” The emphasis is solely on his dead wife and how he loves her, was so lucky to have her, and that he wants to give her everything in him. He ends by saying that if the letter never finds her and they ever speak again, she changed his life. Changing the words to the letter takes away significant meaning, especially coming from one of the few sincere and honest Black men in the film. James represents what all the women are looking for in a man: someone to love and support them, make them happy, and be with them and only them. To take away that and Bernadine’s happiness in the film it paints a false picture for the audience and changes the meaning of why she actually cried in the book.

**Casting Decisions**

I really enjoyed Angela Bassett as Bernadine Harris. Although in the book, Bernadine doesn’t find herself attractive anymore, Angela exemplified everything else of her character. She was strong yet emotional and sometimes unstable. She had a lot of materialistic things and did not enjoy or want them. She portrayed a loving mother and her rage and anger towards her husband very well. Angela brought Bernadine to life literally and did not disappoint.

Whitney Houston was cast as Savannah Jackson. In the book, the character was strong, knew what she wanted, and was dedicated to her career. The only soft spots she seemed to have were for Kenneth and her mother. Whitney did a good job of portraying all of those aspects but that’s as far as it went to me. In the book, there was a spark about Savannah but in Houston’s portrayal I didn’t get that feeling. While watching the movie, I still knew it was Whitney, I didn’t think of her as Savannah.

I think that Loretta Devine portrayed Gloria Matthews well. Like the character she has a pretty face, is a bit overweight, loves her son and her shop, and wants to be in love and know the feeling of it. Loretta was a good choice for her because she exemplified every bit of the character.

Lela Rochon played Robin Stokes. Although in the book she’s described as tacky, she also has a good weave, keeps her nails done, works out three times a week, and is good at her job (at the insurance company). Lela did a good job in all those aspects, especially with her character’s weakness being pretty men with big penises. It’s safe to assume that the lead male in her life, Russell, fit the bill for it as she says it in both the book and movie. I liked Lela as Robin because even though she was sure of herself, did her job well, and kept herself looking good, she made terrible decisions when it came to men. She brought the character to life and I couldn’t understand as to how she could be naïve about the things the men did in her life. For example, she was completely ditzy and naïve about Troy, his drug use, and that he stole her wallet. She would not believe it at all. I don’t think anyone else could have played that role better than her.

**Missing Material**

After I read the book, I watched the movie. There were several things missing. One of the first things was Gloria’s heart attack. I felt that material should have definitely been in the movie because it related to an important part of Gloria’s character. She not only made mention about her weight, but her son, Savannah, Robin, and Bernadine did too. The heart attack was a critical turning point for her because she almost died. She accepted that she had to lose weight, eat healthy, and not be in limbo about either one anymore because her life depended on it.

Another thing missing was Savannah’s work trip to Vegas where she met Charles. Even though Savannah spent about a week in Vegas with him, it meant much to her when it was time to leave. They shared bible verses, aspirations, career goals and many other things that she hadn’t really shared with another. He gave her hope, support, and made it seem as though they had something in the making. It broke her heart after she got back and hadn’t heard from him in two weeks, she realized she never would again. I really do believe that what he did to her helped to make the decision about leaving Kenneth. As well as not only treating herself better but making better decisions about men period.

Even though Savannah’s mother is in the movie, there is no mention of Savannah’s siblings, especially her sister Sheila. A lot of the dialogue in the book between her mother and her is about Kenneth, but her sister as well. They talk about how she keeps leaving her husband, has to watch her money, etc. Many of the reasons why Savannah’s character is strong, hard-working, and unwilling to settle is because of her sister and family.

Granted Robin has plenty of men problems, but nothing made mention of the fact that Robin is going through tough times with her family back in Tucson. She frequently talks about her father having Alzheimer’s and her mother having a double mastectomy. Her father’s Alzheimer’s is getting progressively worse and its taking a toll on her mother. She spends quite a bit of time with them and is pained over the fact that she doesn’t have the money to help out more. That would definitely take a lot of stress off of her mother because as he worsens she can’t take care of him like he needs and herself.

Bernadine’s mother isn’t in the movie as well. She didn’t like John and knew he was no good for her daughter. Her mother was crucial in helping Bernadine because she kept the kids for her while she sorted out her thoughts and got herself together after John said he was leaving her.

Black Women on the Move isn’t mentioned in the movie at all. It’s a support group organization for Black women on the move who want to help the community. BWOTM became an integral part of the women’s life and was very important to them.

In the book Bernadine plans to use some of the settlement money to donate to UNCF, the NAACP, Black women on the Move, the Urban League, and feed some of the kids in Africa that she sees on television at night. In the film none of that is mentioned.

Of all the characters, I think that Bernadine was the most unstable in the book. I say this because she popped Xanax pills like they were candy and smoked cigarettes heavily. The sad thing is that she had stopped smoking but started back after John left her. Her smoking was included in the film but not her taking Xanax pills. Taking those Xanax pills are a central part of her character in the book, it represented how she had started taking those years prior to John leaving to cope with her miserable life. For that not to be in the film, it takes away from who her character is and denies the audience from truly seeing and understanding how unhappy she had been (for a long time) prior to John leaving.

**Making Changes**

In the book Savannah, Gloria, and Bernadine both smoke cigarettes, they are also trying to stop. Actually Bernadine had already stopped for a few months but started again after John told her he was leaving her. Savannah stops smoking after she meets Charles but she starts again after she doesn’t hear from him. They all want to stop mostly because it’s unhealthy and their teeth are yellowing. Gloria can’t even blow the candles out on her birthday cake. In the movie, they all smoke, and at least one of them is smoking in just about every scene. It’s mostly to ease whatever they’re feeling, help them relax and feel better.

In the movie scene she says, “Hell yeah! I’m single and desperate and I have no morals and as soon as you turn your back or go to the bathroom, I’m going to flirt with your man and try to take him.” I was very disappointed with this scene because it took away from Savannah’s character and truly portrayed her as desperate and willing to sabotage another’s relationship for her own personal gain. In the book, this is what she was against and saying that sisters need to trust each other more and not think that everyone is out to try and take their man or sabotage their relationships.

**Future Research**

Should anyone ever want to try their own hand at this research project, I would suggest that they try to get an interview with McMillan and Whitaker themselves. That’s a stretch but they would be great sources seeing as how this project is about their visions. Whether they can or cannot interview them, I would also suggest trying to find more literature on both the film and novel. This would be literature that actually critiques characters, actresses, director, and author, everything that they’ll be writing about. Maybe the research question could be changed to something else, so that the author can offer a different perspective.

**Research Paper Grade: A-**

act (**what** was done)

scene (**where** it was done)

agent (**who** did it)

agency (**how** the speaker did it, methods or techniques)

purpose (**why** it happened)

* **Abstract:**
  + - **Your abstract needs to be a brief synopsis of your project**
* **Table of Contents:**
  + - **We already discussed how this needs to look. Delete the letters and numbers that make it look like an outline. Then, place a page number at the end of EVERY line item.**
* **General Formatting:**
  + - **Excellent**
* **Statement of the Problem:**
  + - **Excellent**
* **Research Question:**
  + - **Excellent**
* **Significance & Purpose:**
  + - **Excellent**
* **Scope & Limitations:** 
  + - **Excellent**
* **Methodology & Organizational Pattern:**
  + - **Excellent**
* **Chapter two (Literature Review):**
  + - **Excellent**
* **Chapter three:**
  + - **Slight difficulty with the pentad**
* **Chapter four:**
  + - **Slight difficulty with the pentad**
* **Chapter five (The Conclusion):**
  + - **Very good**