

The Representation of Racial Discrimination and Its Social Implications in Green Book (2018)

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Abstract: This study analyzes the representation of racial discrimination and its social implications in *Green Book* (2018). The film portrays the racial experiences of African Americans in the United States during the 1960s through the journey of Dr. Don Shirley, an African American pianist, and Tony Vallelonga, his driver. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method with a film analysis approach. The data consist of dialogues, scenes, character interactions, and narrative and cinematic elements depicting racial discrimination. The analysis integrates Feagin's theory of racial discrimination, Hall's theory of representation, Bordwell and Thompson's film theory, Du Bois's (1903) concept of double consciousness, and Bonilla-Silva's theory of systemic racism to examine the forms, representation, and social implications of racial discrimination. The findings reveal four forms of racial discrimination represented in the film: individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, cultural racism, and spatial segregation, with institutional discrimination appearing most frequently. The study also finds several social implications, including identity struggle, power imbalance, social exclusion, and limited social mobility. These findings demonstrate that *Green Book* represents racism as a systemic social issue embedded in institutions, cultural values, and everyday interactions.

Keywords: racial discrimination, representation, social implications, *Green Book* (2018)

INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination has long been recognized as one of the most significant social problems affecting individuals and communities throughout the world. It occurs when people are treated unfairly or unequally because of their racial or ethnic background. Throughout history, racial discrimination has influenced access to education, employment, housing, political participation, and social opportunities. Although many societies have implemented laws and policies promoting equality, racial discrimination continues to exist in both explicit and subtle forms. As a result, issues related to race and discrimination remain important topics in social, cultural, and literary studies because they reveal how power, privilege, and inequality operate within society.

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In the United States, racial discrimination has a particularly complex historical background. The legacy of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism has contributed to the unequal treatment of African Americans for centuries. Following the abolition of slavery, discriminatory practices continued through segregation laws and social customs that restricted the rights and freedoms of Black citizens. During the Jim Crow era, African Americans faced limitations in education, transportation, accommodation, public facilities, and political participation. Although the Civil Rights Movement brought significant legal reforms, the impact of racial discrimination continued to influence social structures and everyday interactions. Therefore, understanding how racial discrimination is represented in cultural products remains relevant for examining broader social realities.

Media and popular culture play an important role in shaping public understanding of race and social inequality. Among various forms of media, film is one of the most influential because it combines visual, verbal, and narrative elements to construct meaning. Films do not merely entertain audiences; they also communicate values, ideologies, and perspectives about society. According to Hall (1997), representation is the process through which meaning is produced and exchanged through language, signs, and images. Representation does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs it. Consequently, films can function as cultural texts that both reflect and shape public perceptions of social issues, including racial discrimination. Through characters, dialogue, setting, and cinematic techniques, films are able to portray experiences of inequality and encourage audiences to critically examine social conditions.

One film that addresses the issue of racial discrimination is *Green Book* (2018), directed by Peter Farrelly. The film is based on the true story of Dr. Don Shirley, an African American classical pianist, and Tony Vallelonga, an Italian American driver who accompanies him on a concert tour through the segregated southern United States during the early 1960s. Throughout their journey, Dr. Shirley experiences various forms of racial discrimination despite his success, education, and professional reputation. He is denied access to restaurants, hotels, and public facilities, while also facing prejudice and exclusion from white society. Through these experiences, *Green Book* presents a powerful depiction of racial inequality and the challenges faced by African Americans during a period characterized by legal and social segregation.

The historical setting of *Green Book* is particularly significant because it reflects the realities of the Jim Crow era. During this period, racial segregation was legally and socially enforced in many parts of the United States. African Americans were often prohibited from using the same facilities as white citizens and were frequently subjected to discriminatory treatment in public and private spaces. The title of the film itself refers to *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a travel guide that listed hotels, restaurants, and service stations considered safe for African American travelers. The existence of this guide demonstrates the extent to which racial discrimination affected mobility, social participation, and everyday life. Therefore, the film provides valuable material for examining how racial discrimination operates through institutions, social interactions, and cultural beliefs.

The representation of racial discrimination in *Green Book* can be analyzed through several theoretical perspectives. According to Joe R. Feagin, racial discrimination is not

limited to individual prejudice but also includes institutional discrimination, cultural racism, and structural inequality. These forms of discrimination influence how minority groups are perceived and treated within society. In addition, Hall's theory of representation provides a framework for understanding how films construct meanings about race and social identity. By combining these perspectives, it becomes possible to examine not only the forms of discrimination portrayed in the film but also the broader messages conveyed through its narrative and visual elements.

Furthermore, racial discrimination produces significant social consequences that extend beyond immediate acts of exclusion. According to Bonilla-Silva (2018), racism functions as a social system that maintains unequal power relations between racial groups. Such inequalities influence identity formation, access to opportunities, and social participation. Similarly, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) introduced the concept of Double Consciousness to explain the psychological experience of African Americans who must constantly negotiate between their own self-perception and the way they are viewed by a racially prejudiced society. These theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant to the experiences of Dr. Don Shirley, whose achievements do not protect him from discrimination and exclusion.

As a cinematic work, *Green Book* also relies on narrative and technical elements to communicate its messages. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2013), films construct meaning through narrative elements such as plot, character, conflict, setting, and theme, as well as cinematic elements including lighting, sound, costume, camera techniques, and editing. These elements work together to shape audience interpretation and emotional response. Therefore, analyzing both narrative and cinematic aspects is essential for understanding how racial discrimination is represented throughout the film. Benshoff and Griffin (2009) further emphasize that films are cultural texts that reflect and shape public understandings of race, class, gender, and other social identities. Consequently, analyzing *Green Book* enables a deeper understanding of how cinematic narratives contribute to broader discussions of racial inequality and social justice.

Numerous previous studies have examined racial discrimination and its representation in films from various theoretical perspectives. Hall (1997) explains that representation is an active process through which meanings about race and identity are constructed and communicated to audiences. Similarly, Bonilla-Silva (2018) argues that racism operates as a systemic social structure embedded in institutions and everyday practices rather than merely through individual prejudice. In film studies, Bordwell and Thompson (2013) emphasize that narrative and cinematic elements play an essential role in conveying ideological meanings. Although these perspectives have contributed significantly to understanding racial representation, relatively limited attention has been given to how different forms of racial discrimination are simultaneously represented through narrative and cinematic techniques and how they produce broader social implications. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining both the forms of racial discrimination and their social implications in *Green Book* (2018).

Based on this gap, the present study offers a more comprehensive approach by examining both the forms of racial discrimination and their social implications in *Green*

Book (2018). This study integrates Feagin's theory of racial discrimination, Hall's theory of representation, Du Bois (1903) concept of double consciousness, Bonilla-Silva's theory of systemic racism, and Bordwell and Thompson's theory of film form into a single analytical framework. Feagin's categories are used to identify the forms of discrimination represented in the film, while Hall's theory explains how these forms are constructed through representation. Bordwell and Thompson provide analytical tools for examining the narrative and cinematic techniques that communicate these meanings. The resulting representations are then interpreted through Du Bois (1903) and Bonilla-Silva's perspectives to understand how racial discrimination shapes identity, social relations, and power structures. Together, these theories enable an examination not only of what forms of racism appear in *Green Book*, but also how the film constructs and ideologically frames those experiences.

Therefore, this study aims to answer two research questions: (1) What forms of racial discrimination are represented in *Green Book* (2018)? and (2) How are those forms of racial discrimination portrayed and what social implications do they produce? By addressing these questions, the study is expected to contribute to literary studies, film studies, and cultural studies by providing a deeper understanding of how films represent social inequality and how such representations influence the understanding of race, identity, and social relations. In addition, the findings are expected to encourage critical awareness of the continuing relevance of racial discrimination and the importance of equality, respect, and social justice in contemporary society.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the representation of racial discrimination and its social implications in *Green Book* (2018). Qualitative research was selected because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, representations, and social realities portrayed through narrative and cinematic elements rather than measuring numerical data. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is appropriate for exploring and understanding social phenomena through detailed interpretation of textual and visual data. A film analysis design was used because the research aimed to investigate how racial discrimination is represented through scenes, dialogues, characterization, conflict, setting, and cinematic techniques.

The object of this research was *Green Book* (2018), a biographical comedy-drama film directed by Peter Farrelly. The primary data consisted of dialogues, character interactions, visual scenes, settings, and cinematic elements that portray racial discrimination and its social implications. Supporting data were obtained from scholarly books, journal articles, previous studies, and theoretical sources related to racial discrimination, representation, sociology, and film studies. These secondary sources were used to strengthen the interpretation of the findings and provide theoretical support for the analysis.

The researcher served as the primary instrument of the study. To ensure systematic data organization, a data sheet was developed to record relevant scenes, dialogue excerpts, timestamps, forms of racial discrimination, narrative elements, cinematic elements, and social implications identified throughout the film. The data sheet enabled the researcher to classify and compare findings consistently during the analysis process.

Data collection was conducted through several stages. First, the researcher watched the film repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure, characters, and visual presentation. Second, scenes, dialogues, and character actions related to racial discrimination were identified and documented. Third, the selected data were classified according to the forms of racial discrimination proposed by Feagin, namely individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, cultural racism, and spatial segregation. Finally, the data were organized into analytical categories to facilitate interpretation and discussion.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Following Krippendorff (2018), content analysis enables researchers to interpret meanings embedded within texts and visual materials systematically. The analysis began by identifying scenes that contained representations of racial discrimination. The selected data were then categorized according to the forms of discrimination and examined through narrative elements, including plot, characterization, conflict, setting, and theme, as well as cinematic elements such as costume, lighting, sound, camera techniques, and mise-en-scène. Subsequently, the social implications of racial discrimination were interpreted using sociological concepts, including identity struggle, power imbalance, social exclusion, and limited social mobility.

The findings were analyzed through an integrated theoretical framework. Feagin's theory was used to classify forms of racial discrimination, while Hall's theory of representation guided the interpretation of how these forms were constructed through narrative and cinematic elements. Bordwell and Thompson's concepts of film form were employed to examine the visual and narrative strategies used to communicate discriminatory experiences. The broader social and ideological implications of these representations were subsequently interpreted through Du Bois (1903) concept of double consciousness and Bonilla-Silva's theory of systemic racism. This integrated approach enabled the study to connect cinematic representation, social meaning, and power relations within a single analytical framework.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher applied source triangulation by comparing the findings with relevant theoretical and empirical studies on racial discrimination and representation. Repeated observation of the film and continuous review of the collected data were also conducted to ensure consistency and credibility in the interpretation process.

RESULTS

This study identified four forms of racial discrimination represented in *Green Book* (2018), namely individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, cultural racism, and spatial segregation. Among these categories, institutional discrimination appeared most frequently throughout the film. The findings indicate that racial discrimination is portrayed not only through direct interpersonal interactions but also through social institutions and cultural practices that systematically restrict African Americans' access to equal treatment.

Table 1. Forms of Racial Discrimination Represented in *Green Book* (2018)

Type of Discrimination	Frequency	Representative Scene
Individual Discrimination	2	Police confrontation and questioning
Institutional Discrimination	3	Restroom denial, restaurant exclusion, hotel rejection
Cultural Racism	2	“This is not a place for your kind”; racial stereotyping
Spatial Segregation	2	Green Book usage; eating alone scene

The findings reveal that institutional discrimination dominates the narrative, emphasizing that racism in *Green Book* is constructed as a systemic mechanism rather than a series of individual prejudices. The repeated denial of Dr. Don Shirley's access to public facilities, despite his professional status and achievements, illustrates that racial identity overrides social status within segregated institutions. These recurring acts of exclusion construct the ideological message that public spaces are organized to preserve white privilege while limiting Black citizenship and participation. From Hall's perspective, such representations do not merely reflect historical reality but actively produce meanings that normalize unequal power relations. Consequently, the film encourages audiences to understand institutional discrimination as a structural form of racism embedded in everyday social life rather than as isolated discriminatory incidents.

The film also portrays individual discrimination through encounters with police officers who treat Dr. Shirley with suspicion and hostility, reflecting how racial prejudice becomes embedded in everyday interpersonal interactions. As Essed (1991) argues, everyday racism operates through routine social practices and ordinary interactions that normalize unequal treatment and reinforce racial hierarchies. Rather than depicting these encounters as isolated incidents, the film suggests that individual discrimination reinforces broader institutional and cultural systems of racism. Similarly, cultural racism is represented through verbal expressions that construct racial stereotypes and position Black identity as inferior to whiteness. Spatial segregation, symbolized by the necessity of using the Green Book travel guide and the physical separation of Black individuals from white social spaces, further illustrates how racial ideology regulates mobility, belonging, and access to public life. Collectively, these representations demonstrate that racism operates not only through explicit discriminatory acts but also through social norms and cultural practices that normalize unequal power relations.

The analysis further shows that racial discrimination produces several social implications, including identity struggle, social exclusion, power imbalance, and limited social mobility. These implications are portrayed through Dr. Shirley's experiences as he navigates a society structured by racial inequality.

The representation of racial stereotypes in *Green Book* also reflects broader media patterns identified by Dixon and Linz (2000), who argue that media representations frequently reinforce unequal racial perceptions through recurring images and narratives. Although *Green Book* seeks to criticize racism, its portrayal of racial conflict demonstrates how cinematic representations continue to influence public understandings of race and social inequality.

Table 2. *Social Implications of Racial Discrimination in Green Book (2018)*

Social Implication	Representative Scene
Identity Struggle and Double Consciousness	“You're not like the other Black people I know”
Power Imbalance	Police confrontation and questioning
Social Boundaries and Exclusion	Restroom denial and restaurant exclusion
Limited Social Mobility	Green Book usage and hotel rejection

The findings suggest that the social implications of racial discrimination are closely interconnected. Identity struggle emerges when individuals are continuously exposed to exclusion and unequal treatment, while power imbalance reinforces the dominance of particular racial groups within social institutions. These conditions contribute to social exclusion and limit opportunities for mobility and participation in society. Through the experiences of Dr. Shirley, the film demonstrates that racial discrimination affects not only access to public facilities but also personal identity, dignity, and social relationships.

DISCUSSION

The discussion combines the perspectives of Feagin, Hall, Du Bois (1903), Bonilla-Silva, and Bordwell and Thompson to explain how racial discrimination is represented and how those representations produce broader social meanings. Rather than treating discrimination as an isolated social phenomenon, the integrated framework allows the film to be examined as a cultural text that constructs, communicates, and normalizes particular understandings of race, identity, and power.

The findings indicate that *Green Book* (2018) does not merely depict racial discrimination as a series of isolated incidents but represents racism as an ideological system embedded within social institutions, cultural norms, and everyday interactions. Following Hall (1997), representation functions as a process through which meaning is constructed rather than simply reflected. Guerrero (1993) further argues that cinematic representations of African Americans are shaped by broader cultural and ideological discourses that influence how Black identity is perceived by audiences. Therefore, the repeated scenes of exclusion in the film do more than document historical racism; they normalize racial hierarchy by positioning white spaces as legitimate sites of belonging while restricting Black individuals' access to those spaces. Through this representation, the film constructs racism as a social order that regulates citizenship, dignity, and social participation.

From a broader film and cultural studies perspective, *Green Book* can also be understood as a cultural text that constructs meanings about race through cinematic representation. Stam (2000) argues that films do not merely reproduce reality but actively shape audience interpretations through narrative structures, visual language, and ideological framing. Similarly, Storey (2021) emphasizes that popular culture serves as a site where meanings, values, and power relations are continuously produced and negotiated. Through its depiction of segregation, exclusion, and interracial interaction, *Green Book* participates in broader cultural discourses about race and social inequality. The film therefore functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium through which audiences engage with historical and contemporary understandings of racial relations in American society.

Furthermore, hooks (1992) argues that representations of Black identity in popular culture are never neutral because they are shaped by dominant ideological perspectives that influence how audiences understand race and power. In *Green Book*, Dr. Shirley's experiences reveal that racial identity is continuously negotiated through interactions with white society, demonstrating that representation functions not only to portray discrimination but also to challenge viewers to question established assumptions about racial difference and social hierarchy.

Institutional discrimination emerges as the dominant form of racism in the film. The denial of access to restaurants, hotels, and restrooms demonstrates how racial inequality is maintained through formal and informal institutional practices. These scenes suggest that discrimination is not simply the result of individual prejudice but is systematically reproduced by social structures. This interpretation is consistent with Critical Race Theory, which argues that racism is deeply embedded in legal, political, and social institutions rather than existing only as individual bias (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In this regard, the film supports Feagin's argument that racism operates through institutions that distribute privileges and restrictions unevenly across racial groups. The repeated exclusion of Dr. Shirley from spaces where he performs highlights the contradiction between professional recognition and social acceptance. Although he is valued as an entertainer, he is denied equal citizenship and human dignity. More importantly, these exclusions function ideologically by reinforcing the assumption that Black individuals may be welcomed for their talents but not fully accepted as equal members of society. The film therefore exposes how institutional racism preserves racial hierarchy even when Black achievement is publicly celebrated. In this sense, discrimination is represented not as personal hostility alone but as a mechanism for maintaining social power.

Dyer (1997) explains that whiteness often operates as an invisible norm that structures social privilege while remaining largely unquestioned. This perspective helps explain why Tony is able to move freely through segregated public spaces, whereas Dr. Shirley encounters repeated restrictions despite his social status and professional accomplishments. The film therefore illustrates how racial privilege is embedded within everyday social structures.

The relationship between race and class is particularly significant in *Green Book*. Dr. Shirley possesses substantial cultural and economic capital as an internationally recognized pianist, while Tony belongs to a working-class background with limited formal education. However, despite Shirley's higher social status, he remains excluded from spaces that Tony can enter without question. This contrast demonstrates that racial privilege often outweighs class disadvantage within segregated social systems. Ideologically, the film constructs whiteness as a source of social legitimacy that grants access and belonging regardless of class position, whereas Blackness remains associated with exclusion despite professional success and economic achievement. Through this contrast, *Green Book* challenges meritocratic assumptions by showing that social mobility alone cannot overcome institutionalized racial hierarchy. From Hall's perspective, these representations actively construct the meaning that race functions as a dominant organizing principle of power, positioning racial identity above class in determining social acceptance and citizenship.

According to Omi and Winant (2015), race is a socially constructed concept that is continually produced and transformed through political, cultural, and institutional processes. The racial boundaries represented in *Green Book* demonstrate that discrimination is sustained not by biological differences but by social practices that define unequal access to power, belonging, and citizenship.

The relationship between Tony and Shirley further illustrates intersecting systems of power. As Crenshaw (1989) argues, systems of inequality cannot be understood through a single social category because race, class, and other social identities intersect to shape experiences of privilege and discrimination. Although Tony occupies a lower economic position, his whiteness grants him forms of social authority unavailable to Shirley. Throughout their journey, Tony is often able to navigate public spaces freely, communicate with local authorities, and receive social acceptance that Shirley is denied. The film therefore reveals that power is not determined by a single social category but emerges through the interaction of race, class, and social status. This intersectional dynamic complicates simplistic understandings of privilege and discrimination.

Gender also intersects with race in shaping Dr. Shirley's experiences. Throughout the film, he is expected to embody emotional restraint, self-control, and dignity despite repeated humiliation. These expectations reflect dominant ideals of masculinity that define men as strong, rational, and emotionally controlled while discouraging vulnerability and emotional expression. In the film, these gender expectations place additional pressure on Dr. Shirley as a Black man, who must not only conform to dominant masculine norms but also avoid reinforcing racist stereotypes that portray Black men as aggressive, emotional, or uncivilized. Consequently, his masculinity is continually negotiated through performances of respectability and self-discipline in predominantly white spaces. This demonstrates that gender is constructed through socially defined expectations of masculinity, while race intensifies those expectations by limiting how Black masculinity can be expressed and socially accepted.

The findings also support Du Bois (1903) concept of double consciousness. Dr. Shirley is positioned between multiple social worlds: he is not fully accepted by white society because of his race, yet he is often portrayed as disconnected from stereotypical representations of Black identity due to his education, occupation, and lifestyle. This condition illustrates how racial discrimination produces identity fragmentation and psychological tension. The film therefore represents racism not only as external exclusion but also as an internal struggle over belonging and self-definition.

Moreover, the *Green Book* itself functions as a powerful ideological symbol. Rather than serving merely as a travel guide, it represents the institutionalization of racial segregation in everyday life. The necessity of carrying such a guide demonstrates how mobility, safety, and access to public space were shaped by racialized power relations. Through this symbol, the film reveals how discrimination extends beyond interpersonal hostility and becomes embedded in the spatial organization of society. The symbolic function of the *Green Book* extends beyond practical travel guidance. Its existence reveals how racism becomes normalized through everyday routines and survival strategies. Rather than challenging segregation directly, the guide reflects how African Americans were forced

to adapt to unequal conditions in order to ensure safety and mobility. Consequently, the film illustrates that racial oppression operates not only through explicit acts of discrimination but also through the normalization of restricted social participation.

Overall, the film demonstrates that racial discrimination cannot be understood solely through individual acts of prejudice. Through its representation of exclusion, segregation, and unequal access to public space, *Green Book* reveals how race, class, and gender intersect within broader structures of power. The film therefore invites audiences to recognize discrimination as a systemic social phenomenon rather than an isolated personal experience.

Kellner (2011) argues that cinema functions as a cultural arena where ideological struggles over politics, identity, and social values are represented and contested. From this perspective, *Green Book* not only recreates historical events but also participates in contemporary debates concerning racial justice, equality, and the continuing legacy of discrimination in American society.

Although *Green Book* offers a critique of racial discrimination, the film itself remains a subject of critical debate. Several scholars have argued that the narrative reflects aspects of the *white savior* trope, in which Tony's personal transformation becomes a central focus of the story rather than Dr. Shirley's own perspective and agency (Hughey, 2014). As a result, the experiences of racism faced by Dr. Shirley are sometimes framed through a white perspective that guides audience sympathy and understanding. This narrative strategy also reflects selective history, as the complexity of Dr. Shirley's experiences and the broader structural realities of racism are simplified to emphasize reconciliation and personal friendship. Such selectivity demonstrates how historical events are reconstructed rather than fully represented. Moreover, the film's Hollywood framing favors an emotionally accessible and commercially appealing narrative by foregrounding individual moral transformation over systemic social change. From Hall's perspective, representation is always selective and ideological rather than neutral. Therefore, *Green Book* should not be viewed solely as a historical reflection of racism but also as a cultural product that reconstructs racial experiences according to particular narrative and commercial conventions. This perspective highlights the importance of critically examining not only what racism is represented in film but also how those representations are produced, whose perspectives are prioritized, and how cinematic conventions shape audiences' understanding of racial inequality.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that *Green Book* (2018) represents racial discrimination through individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, cultural racism, and spatial segregation, with institutional discrimination emerging as the most dominant form. Through narrative and cinematic elements, the film portrays racism as a systemic social phenomenon that shapes access to public space, social participation, and personal identity. The findings further demonstrate that discrimination produces broader social implications, including identity struggle, social exclusion, power imbalance, and restricted mobility. The main contribution of this study lies in its integrated analytical framework, which combines theories of racial discrimination, representation, systemic racism, double consciousness, and film analysis. By connecting forms of discrimination with their ideological construction and

social consequences, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how films represent inequality and power relations. From the researcher's perspective, although *Green Book* effectively raises awareness of racial discrimination and encourages critical reflection on social inequality, its representation should not be accepted uncritically. The film's emphasis on reconciliation through interracial friendship reflects Hollywood's narrative conventions, which may simplify the structural complexity of racism and privilege individual transformation over broader institutional change. Therefore, *Green Book* should be understood as both a critique of racial discrimination and a cultural product shaped by particular ideological and commercial perspectives.

The findings suggest that film functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural medium through which social ideologies are constructed, reproduced, and challenged. *Green Book* encourages audiences to reflect on the continuing relevance of racial inequality while also highlighting the importance of critically examining how race, class, and gender are represented in popular media. Future studies may compare representations of discrimination across different films, investigate audience interpretations, or explore similar issues in other cultural texts and digital media.

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