

American Values in John Lee Hancock's *The Blind Side*

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Abstract

The Blind Side is a movie derived from Michael Lewis' *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game* novel. This movie tells about Michael Oher, a poor black teenager, who is cared for by the country because his mother is a drug addict. The practices of American Values (Paul, 2014; Datesman, Kearny, Crandall, & Kearny, 2005; Doran & Litrell, 2013) can be found through the characters of Michael Oher, Burt Cotton, Leigh Anne Tuohy, and S.J. Tuohy. The data found in this movie is strengthened by Boggs and Petrie (2008)'s movie studies. The findings indicate that not every character in Hancock's *The Blind Side* practices American values. Equality seems to be Americans' "homework" evidenced by the Oher's struggle to be accepted as a part of Wingate Christian School. Oher's hard work, however, is fruitful when he is chosen as a quarterback which then brings material wealth to him. All in all, Hancock's *The Blind Side* is a paradoxical example of American values practiced by the society.

Keywords: Hancock's *The Blind Side*, American Values, Football, equality

INTRODUCTION

Such movie genres as action, adventure, thriller, comedy, crime, fantasy, biography, history, mystery may be based on true stories of somebody's journey of life (biographical movies) or other historical moments. Those moments are visually and verbally communicated through movies (Boggs & Petrie, 2008). A biographical (biopic) movie usually tells us about popular persons, heroes of a country, or any inspiring persons, which may start from the persons' childhood or jump into their achievement (Bingham, 2010). As the object of this research, *The Blind Side* is interesting to study because it tells about seventeen-year-old boy named Michael Oher who is in a foster care due to his mother's drug addiction. He comes to Memphis to look for a better education quality. He, then, goes to one of private schools in Memphis named Wingate

Christian School. There, he struggles because he is the only African-American boy among white children.

During his study in Wingate Christian School, Oher meets the Tuohys. Leigh Anne Tuohy finds out Michael walking on the road, shivering in the cold without adequate clothing. Leigh Anne Tuohy offers him to sleep in the couch in the Tuohys' home. Noticing that Oher always wears the same outfit, she decides to bring him shopping to buy some clothes and shoes. Leigh Anne Tuohy also makes a new bedroom for him. She even buys him a car and treats him as if he is her own child. Then, the Tuohys decide to be Oher's legal guardian. The Tuohys accept Oher as the member of their family regardless his race (Tuohy Family Who Adopted Michael Oher Part 1, 2009). Finally, Oher has an opportunity to join Wingate

football team. Oher's popularity attracts several universities offer scholarships for him.

METHODOLOGY

Hancock's *The Blind Side* is a representation of American values, which are generally discussed in pairs as they overlap each other: material wealth and hard work, self-reliance and individual freedom, equality and competition (Datesman, Kearny, Crandall, & Kearny, 2005; Paul, 2014; Doran & Litrell, 2013). Equality means that everybody has the same chance to compete and to gain success despite their gender, race, profession, etc. While, material wealth, by which people can define their own social stage, is the result of hard work. Freedom means the desire and the right of all individuals to control their own destiny without interference. Individual freedom and

self-reliance mean to define one's own life. Those definitions of values are implemented along with Boggs & Petrie (2008)'s movie studies. The characters, dialogue, setting, costume, and cinematography of Hancock's *The Blind Side* are analyzed to strengthen the representation of American values in this movie.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Equality of Opportunity and Competition

Wingate Christian School's teachers and Burt Cotton represent the practice of equality of opportunity. It can be seen from the decision of Wingate Christian School's teachers to permit Michael Oher to attend the school despite of his background.

- Headmaster : Michael Oher gives us no reason to believe that based on his records, that he would be successful here.
- Burt Cotton : Well, how bad it could be?
- Teacher : We're not exactly sure how old he is, due to his lack of records. He has a measured IQ of 80, which is sixth percentile. His grade point average begins with zero, 0,6.
- Burt Cotton : He is a brave kid. for wanting to come here, for wanting a quality education. An education denied him by the poor quality of school he's attended. Most kid with his background wouldn't come within 200 miles of this place.
- Teacher : Burt Cotton, we understand your interest in this young man's athletic abilities
- Headmaster : He wouldn't be able to play sports until he got his grades up
- Burt Cotton : Forget sports, look at the wall "Christian" we either take that seriously or we paint over it? You don't admit Michael Oher because **of sport, you admit him because it's the right things to do.**

(Hancock, 2016)

From this conversation, it can be seen that the teachers and the headmaster feel doubtful to let Oher become the student of Wingate Christian School because he has a low IQ (Intelligence Quotient) and GPA (Grade Point Average) scores. IQ is a number used to express the apparent relative intelligence of a person. An IQ between 90 and 110 is considered

average and IQ over 120 is considered superior but Michael only has 80 score of IQ which is very low score. GPA, moreover, is a number representing the average value of the accumulated final grades earned in courses overtime (Korzen, 2015; Partnership; Montt, 2011). Despite his incapability in academic field, Cotton believes that Oher has something

more than just academic ability. He believes that Oher is able to contribute to Wingate Christian School with his talent as a football player. Therefore, Cotton does not want to give up on Oher. He emphasizes the word “Christian” and persuades the headmaster to admit Oher because as a Christian, one has to do something based on love, to accept Oher in that school is to prove the teaching of love. In this sequence of event, it can be highlighted that equality as one of the American values is represented. By promoting Christianity, Cotton underlines that “equality” is not only one of the American values but also one of the Christian values (as the basis of the school). This, somehow proves that American values cannot be separated from Christian values.

In Hancock’s *The Blind Side*, it is told that the Tuohys adopt Michael Oher. This gives Oher an opportunity to live in an ideal family consisting of father, mother, and siblings. The Tuohys really love Oher as a part of the family. Once, Collin Touhy says, “Michael Oher he is a teddy bear on the inside, you wouldn’t think it, but he is”. “Teddy bear” might refer to a person who is big and scary but he/ she is actually really sweet and nice. From this utterance, it can be concluded that Collin Tuohy really likes his brother because he has a good personality although his body describes the opposite. Furthermore, Figure 1 is a proof the Tuohys regards Oher as their part. Michael Oher takes a Christmas family picture that he has never done before.



Figure 1 Touhy’s Family Christmas Card
(Source: Hancock, 2009, *The Blind Side*, 00:45:57)

Competition as one of the American values, is also faced by Michael Oher. At Wingate Christian School, Oher has to compete with other students in the academic field. It is shown in the movie that Michael Oher struggles in the adaptation process in his new school. One thing he should adapt with is the ways of learning. As a proof, there is a scene showing that on his first day of school, he cannot answer of the quiz. As seen in Figure 2, Oher is able to only write his name on the

answer sheet without answering even one of the questions in the quiz. However, finally, his struggle is paid off. He improves his academic ability and score. Figure 3 shows his score in a Biology quiz. In this figure, it is also shown that Michael Oher is able to fill in the answers, although the grade is not A, but at least he does not only write his name on the answer sheet, but also the answers.

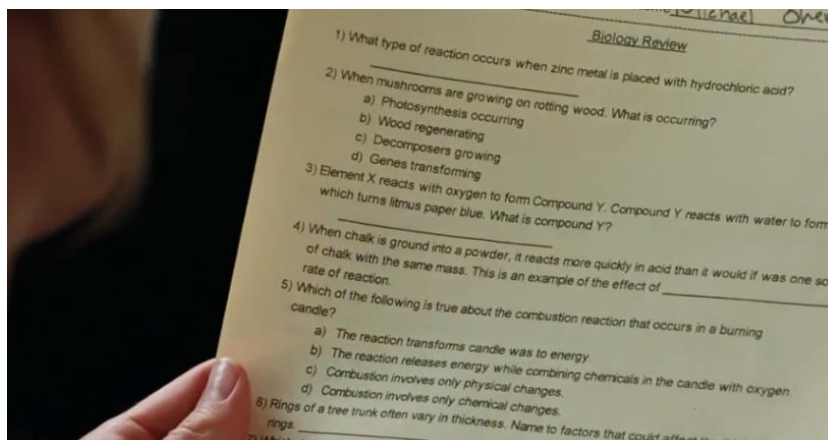


Figure 2 Michael Oher's Answer Sheet
(Source: Hancock, 2009, *The Blind Side*, 00:11:32)

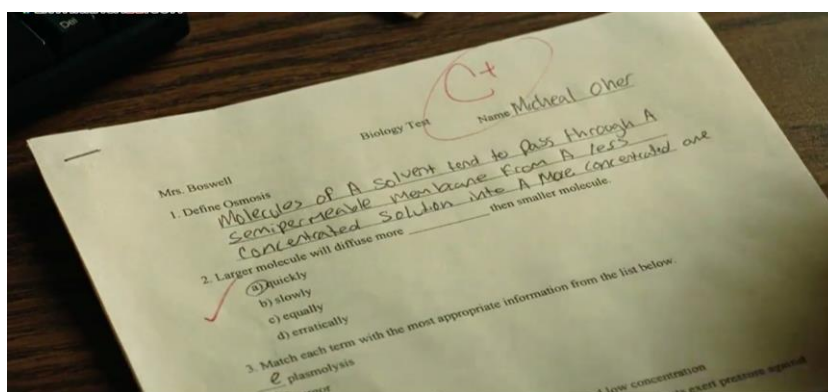


Figure 3 Michael Oher's Score on Biology Test
(Source: Hancock, 2009, *The Blind Side*, 00:39:09)

Another equality issue at Wingate Christian School is that the fact that Michael Oher is the only black person among other students. Finding even one friend at this school is not an easy thing to do for him, despite the fact the school is a Christian school, which is assumed to be a better example of an institution practicing equality. This irony is strengthened by Figure 4, a scene when Oher tries to talk to two little girls in the school. When Oher says, "Hi..!," those girls run away and leave him. It is not further explained why the girls leave Oher. Is it because Oher is black? Or is it because

Oher has a 'giant' body so that the little girls are afraid of him? Moreover, students at Wingate Christian School deliver a 'dislike expression' to Oher when he enters the library. This scene leads the movie watchers to assume that those students do not like Michael Oher studying at the same place with them. This is, of course, a paradoxical condition contrasting what so called "American values" with the facts happen in the society. Hancock's *The Blind Side*, in this case, delivers an implicit criticism on how Americans do not practice equality as one of their values and dreams.



*Figure 4 The Two Girls Leave Him After He Greets Them
(Source: Hancock, 2009, The Blind Side, 00:14:54)*

Material Wealth and Hard Work

In this movie, which is based on a true story, in 2009, Michael Oher is chosen as the player of a professional football team. Figure 5 is the picture of the real Oher along with the Tuohys when Oher is chosen as the 23rd player for Baltimore Raven, an American professional football team based in Baltimore, Maryland (Lewis, 2006). In this occasion, Oher is trusted to be in the quarterback position who has a higher salary than those who are in the other positions. The amount he earns from a contract with Ravens in 2009 is \$13.495.000. He also

earns a salary cap (a limit on the amount of money a club can spend on player salaries) in 2009 as much as \$1.252.000 and the number increases continuously every year. The highest number he earns is in 2013 with \$4.955.000 (Lewis, 2006; 2009 Quarterback Salaries; Ravens, 2019). He signed a contract with Ravens on July 2009 and *The Blind Side* was released in November 2009. He becomes more popular not only among the football coaches but also among the society because of this movie.



*Figure 5 Michael Oher was Chosen as Baltimore Ravens Player
(Source: Hancock, 2009, The Blind Side, 02:03:49)*

Oher has never played football before his study in Wingate Christian School. Therefore, it really is a struggle which brings him to his position as a quarterback in Baltimore Raven.

At first, Michael Oher's trying to learn to play football is one evidence of hard work as one of the American values. It takes him a long time to just understand the rules of the game. To make

him understand the rules of the game easier, he simulates the game by the means of cooking ingredients and utensils accompanied by SJ Tuohy (See Figure 6). Besides, Michael Oher

also improves his athletic skills such as running and doing sit up with SJ Tuohy's assistance as seen by Figure 7 (A Look Back-Collins Tuohy: My Brother, Michael Oher, 2010).



Figure 6 Michael Oher Learns the Game Rules at Home
(Source: Hancock, 2009, *The Blind Side*, 01:04:52)



Figure 7 Michael Oher Sits Up Helped by SJ
(Source: Hancock, 2009, *The Blind Side*, 00:54:03)

Oher's hard work and struggle pick him to be a professional football player. Figure 8 is a scene where Michael's team becomes the champions. This scene implements a close-up shot to focus on Michael Oher's and Burt Cotton's expressions. In this scene, Burt Cotton gives Oher the trophy proudly and Oher takes it happily shown by his wide smile. This first success, then, attracts several universities to

offer some scholarships to Oher. This is, of course, contradicts the first days of Oher's school when everybody ignores him because of being black. After his success, then, many people adore him. It, then, leads to a question: is equality a real American value? Does a black person have to carve a big or even a huge achievement to be equal with those who are white, Anglo-Saxons, and protestant?



Figure 8 Wingate Football as the Winner of a Game
(Source: Hancock, 2009, *The Blind Side*, 01:33:42)

CONCLUSION

Hancock's *The Blind Side* portrays Oher's struggle to be admitted as one part of American society. This movie proves that although equality is mentioned in American declaration of independence, its practices are not always easy, especially for black due to a long history of slavery which put black in the inferior position for many decades (Stephanie, 2015). Oher is lucky because he has the ability as a football player which picks him up as a popular quarterback. These opportunities, however, will be different from those who do not have such talents. This movie, therefore, portrays ironies and paradoxical situations of the practice of American values. It is shown that not every American practice the equality of opportunity,

even Burt Cotton has to persuade Wingate Christian School to accept Oher. This value is proven by the Tuohys that love Oher unconditionally despite his background as a black, poor, and uneducated boy. It is their love which brings Oher to be what and who he is – a popular football player. Oher, on the other side, is a real example when competition meets hard work, it can bring him to success. Oher's willingness to adapt, learn, and compete wholeheartedly is his stepping stone to a rich football player. In Hancock's *The Blind Side*, there is a change on Michael Oher's lack of confidence to be the opposite one. This issue can be an interesting topic for further researchers using psychological approach.

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