 Freedom Writers

*Freedom Writers* is an ambitious film. It seeks to be both an indictment of the broad concept of the American dream and a lived account of inequality experienced by America’s disillusioned youth. By incorporating aspects of race, economic class, and education, it paints a comprehensive picture of the general systemic injustices of the United States which persist to this day. The movie does not end as a dissociated critique of systemic oppression; it also casts light on the very real struggles of youth suffering at the hands of their environment. Although the generic success story narrative it employs risks degrading the film into a cliché of the very system it is challenging, the examples the movie provides are valuable and offer meaningful insights on sociological issues universal to all societies.

            The movie takes place in Long Beach, California in the early 90s. The opening scenes depict the state of Woodrow Wilson High School post-voluntary integration as a fierce battleground of race and class. The student population is highly factionalized with the white elites grouped into advanced honorary courses and ensured high-quality curriculums while minority racial groups stick with their own and fight each other in an academically low performing track abandoned by the school. The counterculture of the minority students is evident; to them, the school is merely a battleground on which the social dynamics of their tense lives outside of school are carried on to. The students are deliberately disrespectful and defiant towards their teachers. The animosity directed towards the teachers takes root in racial and economic conflict. The white, middle-class teachers of the school represent to the minority students the oppressive system that leaves them no option but the street lifestyle. Marcus and Eva are seen taking a stand against Ms. Gruwell after she confronts the class for their racism, claiming that she will never respect their pain. What is striking about this scene is that it shows Marcus and Eva, as well as the other children of the class, are genuinely hurt by the way Ms. Gruwell dismantles their code of honor and condemns the lifestyle they “choose.” As hard as it is for an entitled, educated woman like Ms. Gruwell to understand, the students are not free to choose alternative lives. Their loyalty towards their community and their strong pride for the gangster way of life is, to an extent, a defense mechanism against a society that condemns their kind and blames them for their way of life whilst leaving them with no other viable alternative. Their counterculture justifies their lack of freedom and dilutes their pain with honor, and as soon as this lack of freedom is somewhat attenuated by the efforts of Ms. Gruwell, we witness the students’ change in attitude towards their communities. Marcus betrays his gang in publicly socializing with his white friend, Andrew betrays his neighbor in choosing his school trip over dealing drugs, and Eva chooses the “right thing” to do over committing perjury to protect her father. These moments serve as a reminder that the working-class counterculture is, above all, a product of the environment.

            Now that it has been made clear that the children’s support of the working-class counterculture is not a result of their free choice but rather a necessity stipulated by their environment, it is important to consider the factors that make up their environment. The students of Ms. Gruwell’s class are predominantly of a minority race and are described as coming from impoverished homes. Lack of financial capital directly inhibits them from accessing educational resources that the other white children of the school most likely utilize, and also indicates a lack of social and cultural capital since economic capital is the most easily transferred form of capital. Their biggest problem, however, is not their capital possession but their family environments. Many of the students, like Andrew, come from broken families with single parents, neglectful parents, abusive parents (as in the case of the girl describing the abuse she endured in her journal), or gangster parents. The process of social reproduction condemns the children to lead the same lives as their parents, as can be seen in the case of Eva who declares her intentions to follow her dad and become a gang member early in the film. Furthermore, the parents pay little attention to their children’s lives, their approach constituting the accomplishment of natural growth. The striking contrast between Ms. Gruwell’s empty class and the many parents shuffling out of her male coworker’s class on the day of parent-teacher conferences shows how minimal the parents’ involvement in their children’s lives is, as opposed to the deeply involved white parents of children on the honorary track.  Ms. Gruwell’s relationship with her nosy father, who still concerns himself with Ms. Gruwell’s occupation and gives her directions to hold herself to higher standards, is also in contrast to the parent-child relationships of the children in her own class. The glimpses of social reproduction seen in this movie are a testament to the survival of classism in the present day.

*Freedom Writers* revolves around the efforts of Ms. Gruwell to inspire her class. It is not a secret that she looks down on their lifestyle and wants to change it. In one of her first verbal confrontations with the class, she denounces their code of honor, saying that it means nothing in the face of death. For Ms. Gruwell, her purposes of education are intellectual, economic, and social. She wants to expand the opportunities that each individual has and ultimately coax them into choosing a path more “favorable” in her eyes, ergo more middle class. Her method of education to achieve these goals is progressive. She strongly encourages her students to write in their journals, voice their opinions, and find solutions to the problems they face. Ms. Gruwell’s goals and methods are distinctly opposite of those practiced by the head of the department towards minority students. In the scene where the two debate giving Ms. Gruwell’s class new books, the head of the department declares that teaching them is futile and instead stresses the importance of getting the students to obey and learn discipline. Her goals are strictly political in that she only seeks to maintain order. In the end, these two approaches yield entirely different results, highlighting the importance of pedagogy in children’s socialization.

            The means that Ms. Gruwell employs in socializing her students are represented symbolically in the pearls she wears. Pearls are an item of sophistication; they are a form of cultural capital in themselves and act as an indicator of Ms. Gruwell’s high social origin. The pearls are recognized and complimented by fellow teachers and authority figures throughout the film, and Ms. Gruwell is consistent in wearing them in the company of fellow adults. The pearls complement Ms. Gruwell’s ambition, hope, and sense of entitlement that her students do not share. As a product of a wealthy environment with a father who practiced concerted cultivation, Ms. Gruwell genuinely believes that people can do anything if they put in the effort. This is why she believes in herself and also encourages her husband Scott to go back to school and achieve his dreams of becoming an architect. Furthermore, it is the reason she never gives up on her students and works hard to socialize them in a way such that they will have more opportunities moving on and can leave the gangster life behind. Erin’s sense of entitlement is well illustrated in her conversation with the head of the school board. The head of the school board urges her to go through the system and take her issues up with her principle and department head. Erin responds by saying, “I’d rather just directly deal with someone in power.” This speaks to her privilege and sense of entitlement which underly all of her actions in the movie, showing signs of a distinctly middle-class habitus. The way she interacted with her students was by gradually transmitting cultural capital to them (the books she bought for the class), valuing their voices through the journal, and encouraging them in a way that the students overtime socialized to think more like her and develop a mindset very unusual among children of their background. In the final moments of the movie, her feat is celebrated by the press, her students, and even some fellow teachers. She was able to successfully transform her students for the better.

            This is where the film risks becoming a cliché of the injustices it allegedly battles. In *Freedom Writers*, Ms. Gruwell is touted as a success and as a model for education. The way she affected her students’ lives is viewed almost ubiquitously as positive and praiseworthy. However, her teaching consequently alienated many of the students from their initial communities and families, the epitome of this being Eva’s forced escape to her aunt’s house. It replaced the working-class countercultural values that they had with middle-class sensibilities and a habitus that values education. As was mentioned right before the credits, many of Ms. Gruwell’s students had become the first in their families to enter university, presumably creating a generational rift between parents and children. Furthermore, throughout the whole film, Ms. Gruwell despises the violent culture of her students. Not once does she change this assessment, for the main incentive behind her active involvement in her students’ lives was to remove them from that culture (through igniting their passion in academics, helping them enter university, giving them social relevance by publishing a book with them, etc.). Her condescendence towards their way of life is symbolized in the commonplace structure of the movie: the white savior extending a hand to the minority. By doing so, she effectively homogenized them and absorbed them into a higher echelon, superseding their previous values with values that glorify escalation within the social hierarchy. In a world where everyone has access to means of social escalation, such an approach might be paraded. But when there is a huge population oppressed by the prevailing system that do not receive that opportunity, and when that population has nothing else in lieu of defense than to create a counterculture against the oppressive system, what Ms. Gruwell’s approach does is subvert their culture and emphasize the inferiority of that population. In the end, what we see in this movie is not empowerment but a rare case of upward social mobility that fails to address the following fundamental question: Should we be going up?

            To summarize, *Freedom Writers* provides a good starting point for further debate. It simultaneously provides a macro and micro perspective for inequality in present society, along with its own solution to the problems. It is worth considering, though, whether the solutions outlined in the movie are truly appropriate, and whether they might be overlooking a core issue that needs to be remedied in our society.