

Magnolia Film Summary

Magnolia by Paul Thomas Anderson

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Context

Magnolia is the story of nine people whose lives connect briefly in strange manners during the course of one day. All the people are connected in some way or another to every other main character. We see how strange things happen, and how to some extent we are all connected to one another.

Paul Thomas Anderson is the director of *Magnolia*. Before this film, he also directed the popular films *Boogie Nights* and *Sydney*, better known as *Hard Eight*. Anderson once said, "I have a feeling, one of those gut feelings, that I'll make pretty good movies the rest of my life. And maybe I'll make some clunkers, maybe I'll make some winners, but I guess the way that I really feel is that *Magnolia* is, for better or worse, the best movie I'll ever make." His intense and intricate film has all the characteristics of a best film, including great actors and a fantastic story. The film is one you can watch a hundred times and still come out seeing something new.

Tom Cruise is admittedly the biggest star in *Magnolia*. Cruise received his first major lead in 1983 with the film *Risky Business*, but he did not truly become a star until he played the role of Lt. Pete "Maverick" Mitchell in *Top Gun*. From that time, Cruise continued making blockbuster films such as *The Color of Money*, *Rain Man*, *A Few Good Men*, *Jerry Maguire*, and *Mission: Impossible*. Compared to most of his roles, Cruise plays a relatively small part in *Magnolia*, but his presence helped get viewers interested in the film.

Julianne Moore, who had also worked with Anderson in his earlier film, *Boogie Nights*, gives a compelling performance in *Magnolia*. Moore began her career performing on daytime soaps such as *As the World Turns*. Later she played a memorable role in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, *The Fugitive*, *Jurassic Park*, *Boogie Nights*, and *Nine Months*. Moore seems to only become better through the years, and her performance in *Magnolia* is breathtaking.

Other actors who appear in both *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* include William H. Macy, John C. Reilly, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Ricky Jay, Luis Guzmán, Philip Baker Hall, and Alfred Molina. Anderson seems to enjoy working with these actors, and several have been cast in other Anderson films as well. The cast seems to work together well, possibly because of their previous work together.

Magnolia was nominated for many awards, but only won a few. In the Academy Awards, Tom Cruise was nominated for Best Actor in a Supporting Role; Aimee Mann for Best Music, Original Song (for "Save Me)," and Paul Thomas Anderson for Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen. The film did win the Berlin Bear and Reader Jury of the "Berliner Morgenpost" award.



Summary and Analysis

The film begins with the narrator's long monologue as we watch events play out. He first talks about three men who were hanged for murdering Sir Edmund William Godfrey as they robbed him. Godfrey lived in Greenberry Hill, London, and the men who killed him were named Joseph Green, Stanley Berry, and Daniel Hill. Green- Berry- Hill. The narrator hopes this was just a matter of chance.

The narrator then tells about a forest fire reported by the *Reno Gazette* in June, 1938. A firefighting plane accidentally pulled scuba diver Delmer Darion out of the lake as it scooped up water to dump on the fire. Between the lake and the tree, Darion died of a heart attack. The next day, pilot Craig Hansen, overcome with guilt, committed suicide. Hansen had met Darion just a couple of nights before. Once again, the narrator hopes this is only a matter of chance.

The third story the narrator tells is about a 1961 awards dinner for the American Association of Forensic Science. At the dinner, Dr. Donald Harper told a bizarre story about how Sydney Barringer's unsuccessful suicide became a successful homicide in March, 1958. The suicide was confirmed by a note Sydney put in his pocket before jumping off a nine-story building where he lived. Three stories down, his parents begin to argue as usual. They often threatened one another with a shotgun. The shotgun unexpectedly went off just as Sydney was falling past the window. Apparently, Sydney had loaded the gun a few days before, and when he passed the window, the bullet hit him. Sydney fell onto a safety net that had been installed three days before. Had he not been killed by the bullet, Sydney's life would have been saved and his suicide attempt unsuccessful. His mother, who fired the shot, was charged with her son's murder, and Sydney was noted as an accomplice in his own death.

The narrator finishes by saying, "And it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that this is not just 'something that happened.' This cannot be 'one of those things...' This, please, cannot be that. And for what I would like to say, I can't. This was not just a matter of chance. Ohhhh. These strange things happen all the time."

We see inside an apartment where a television is showing a Frank T.J. Mackey commercial. We also see Jimmy Gaylor on television. Then, we see a small boy named Stanley on a television game show. We also see Quiz Kid Donnie Smith getting braces as an adult many years after his performance on a popular game show. He runs his car into a building. There is also a man in a hospital room who meets with another man. Then, we see a woman wandering through her house. Another man, Jim Kurring, eats breakfast, reads his newspaper, and watches television before working out. He listens to someone trying to find a mate on a recording. Later, he sits in a meeting at his job as a police officer, then he goes out and talks to himself as he drives.

We then see the forecast for the day: partly cloudy, 82% chance of rain. Jim answers a call about a disturbance and demands to check things out. The woman yells at him, and Jim enters her bedroom to find someone in the closet.



One woman, Linda Partridge, tries to find out what to do when her husband, Earl, dies. The man she speaks with tells her that although they can give her husband stronger drugs, he will not be able to function at all after that. Later, Earl talks to his nurse, Phil, about his son who never comes to visit. Earl tells Phil to find a good woman, as nothing can take the place of a good woman. Earl becomes desperate to talk to his son, whom he at first calls Jack, but then later reveals is Frank Mackey. He asks Phil to find Frank. Earl then falls asleep.

The same night, Mackey performs for a group of people as he tries to teach them how to seduce women. Mackey tries to convince the men they should set goals. Phil calls the number for Frank Mackey from the phone book, but he cannot find him.

Jimmy Gator shows up at Ray's house looking for Claudia, his daughter. She tries to explain that Ray is not her boyfriend, and Jimmy asks her to listen to him. She doesn't want to talk to him, but he begs her. Jimmy has come to tell her that he is dying, but she tells him to get out.

At his office, Donnie loses his job. Donnie tries to convince his boss that he has been a good worker and that he has expenses he can't meet without this job. However, he finally has to turn in his key and leave.

At the apartment, the police report that the dead man in the woman's closet was apparently her husband. There is also supposed to be a son and a child who were there earlier in the day. The woman refuses to say anything about the situation. As Jim leaves the building, a little boy tries to get information from him. The boy tells Jim that he could tell who did it. The little boy finally convinces Jim to watch as he raps. Jim leaves, convinced that he has learned nothing from the boy's rap.

In the library, Stanley reads dozens of books before being picked up by his dad to perform on a game show. We see a reddish, cloudy scene fronted by the words: Light Showers, 99% Humidity, Winds SE 12 MPH. Stanley, soaked through by the rain, asks about how the weather is reported in the studio as he hurries to get ready for the show.

Ruth talks to Jimmy, who is the head of the show, on the phone, and she asks him to come home as soon as the show is over.

Jim visits Ray's apartment where Claudia is staying. She hurries to hide the drugs and stuff she had out. We then see Linda hurrying up to see her psychologist. She gets her prescription from her doctor and runs out. Phil watches television and orders some groceries and pornographic magazines.

Frank meets with a woman who came to watch his performance. He explains to her that it would take him only a moment to get a woman. She decides to start his interview when he finally puts on his clothes. He explains that some women hate him and want to prove him wrong. She tries to get him to calm down so they can do the interview.

Donnie gives himself a pep talk in his car before going into a bar. He watches people as he drinks. Jim convinces Claudia to turn down the music and proceeds to let himself in.



He tells her that the neighbors were worried about her and that she's going to damage her ears and her neighbor's ears if she leaves her music so loud. He realizes she has been drinking and doing drugs, but she denies it. When he says that there were reports of yelling, she admits it is true but that the unwanted person, her father, left.

At the studio, Stanley tells the other kids that he gets study time at school instead of having to go to class. The other children are doing auditions for shows while Stanley is totally focused on the show. Jimmy takes a big drink, and they get ready for the show to begin.

Donnie talks to a man in the bar, and they discuss love. He says his name and announces that he has a lot of love to give. Linda picks up her prescriptions, but the pharmacist seems concerned and makes a call.

Stanley's father and the other parents gossip in the back of the studio and wait for their kids to make them some money. Stanley keeps asking to go to the bathroom, but he never leaves because no one gives him permission. *What Do Kids Know?* finally begins, and the three kids, including Stanley, are pitted against their adult opponents. Jimmy Gator, producer and host of the show, comes onto stage to begin. Earl watches from his bed while Frank gives his interview across town. At the same time, Jim continues to question Claudia, and Donnie watches the show at the bar. Linda waits for the pharmacist, and Ruth lies asleep in bed. The woman from the apartment spends her time getting fingerprinted at the station. Phil answers the door when his groceries arrive.

Stanley does well on the show, and the surrounding adults are impressed. Phil calls someone to help him find Earl's son. He tries to explain that Frank is Earl's son. At his interview, Frank talks about his family. The interviewer is curious about his mother's reaction to his job. He then tells her that his father has passed away, but he is okay with it.

At the pharmacy, the pharmacist tries to talk to Linda about her medications. He tries to warn her that some of the medications can't be mixed. She finally gets the medications, and she becomes angry at him for his curiosity about her life. Earl lies at home in bed watching the television as Phil tries to get information about Frank. The interviewer points out that Frank is not his real name, and he admits that he was never enrolled officially at UC Berkeley. Frank tells her that he is a true rags-to-riches story.

On *What Do Kids Know?* Jimmy presents an extra question that Stanley answers by singing a section from an opera in French. At Claudia's, she and Jim share some small talk and coffee. He tries to protect her while also flirting with her a bit. Backstage at the show, Jimmy starts to have a breakdown. Stanley asks to go to the bathroom again, but the director tells him he can't go until the commercial break.

Earl starts to have hallucinations while Phil tries to take care of him. Phil spills some of Earl's medication, and the dog eats the pills off the floor. Phil remains holding on the line to get Frank's information, and he finally gets in touch with Frank's assistant.



Jimmy Gator tells Mary, his assistant, that he has cancer in his bones and only has a couple of months to live. At the bar, Donnie tells the man that he used to be smart, and some of them remember him. Donnie complains that his parents stole his money from him, and he is still trying to deal with his emotional pain. He compares the pain to the time he was struck by lightning. However, Donnie still claims that he will make his dreams come true yet.

At the interview, the interviewer tries to decipher Frank's past. Frank says that he believes facing the past is an important way to avoid making progress. She tries to get him on track with information about his past, but he avoids her questions. The interviewer reveals that she has spoken with a Mrs. Sims from Frank's past who told her that his mother had died. Mrs. Sims was his neighbor and caretaker after his mother's death, and the interviewer has found out that he is the only son of Earl Partridge. The interviewer wants to know the truth. She asks Frank why he would lie to her.

Linda talks to her lawyer, Alan, and admits that she never really loved Earl. She wants to have Earl's will changed since she loves him now that he's dying. She married him for money, but she feels guilty now that she really loves him. She cheated on him many times, and she does not want to be party to any of the money. Alan explains that she will have to renounce the will when the time comes, but then everything would go to Frank, something Earl desperately didn't want. She storms out of the office when he asks her to calm down.

As the game show continues, Stanley urinates on himself. He accidentally hits his quiz button when he tries to cover it up, and he has to admit that he doesn't know the answer. Jimmy stumbles over his words as he announces the next question and reveals the answer. Jimmy then collapses on the floor. In her apartment, we see Claudia snorting coke. She and Jim sit down and talk about their lives. Jimmy pushes all his help away, and Stanley's dad comes down to the stage. The other kids realize that Stanley had an accident, as his father yells at him for not answering the questions. Stanley begs to keep playing. Stanley's father promises him anything he wants if he just breaks the record.

Jim is finally called away, and he and Claudia say goodbye. Jim returns to Claudia's door and asks her out on a date. He admits that he had wanted to ask her for a date from the moment she opened the door.

At Frank's interview, the interviewer tries to tell Frank that she's not trying to attack him. She had been told that Earl left Frank and her mother, so Frank had to care for his mother alone. Frank's assistant calls during the interview and demands to speak to him. In the final round of the game show, Stanley tells the other kids that he doesn't want to be the one to go this time. However, they tell him he's the smartest, and Jimmy automatically calls him over.

Donnie begins to leave the bar, but first he admits to Brad the bartender that he is in love with him. Then, he yells at the group and tries to show how smart he is. One man tells him that it is dangerous to confuse children and angels, but Donnie disagrees. Jim



drives down the road and thanks God for allowing him to meet Claudia. He promises to treat her right now that he has this opportunity.

Stanley tries to pass to one of the other kids, but they refuse to go as well. He does not want to go this time, because he always answers all the questions. Everyone waits with expectation to see what he will do. The adults laugh at Stanley's indecision, but he tells them that he is not just a tool. He is a person. He is tired of feeling like a freak, and he wants to know why he should be made to feel that way.

On the phone, the assistant tells Phil that he should keep this thing between Frank and Earl quiet. One assistant carries the phone to Frank as Earl lies in bed. Frank waits until his time is up and then he leaves the interview. He kicks the interviewer out of his room, angry that she attacked him.

At his next call, Jim is shot at as he tries to reach an apartment. We hear someone quoting Exodus where it talks about the sins of the fathers being laid upon the sons. Frank talks to his assistant, Janet, who tells him about his father's condition. She tells Frank that he needs to get on the phone to his father.

In the waiting room, Stanley's father throws a chair against the wall and yells at his son as he watches him on the television. The show ends as time finally runs out. Jim struggles through the rain and tries to climb up a hill. Phil waits for Frank to answer when Linda finally comes home. Linda tries to get Phil to hang up the phone, but Frank hangs up anyway. Linda explains that Frank does not exist in that family, but Phil continues to tell her that he was just doing as Earl asked.

The other kids on the show are angry about Stanley's behavior. Jim cries in the rain and asks God to help him. He can't find his gun, and he is scared and wet. Claudia watches the end of the show and cries. Linda lies in bed with Earl and cries as well. The night seems to be filled with tears and rain. Linda apologizes to Phil for her behavior and asks him to tell Earl she is sorry. She leaves before Phil gives Frank the liquid morphine.

Frank goes back onstage for his next seminar. Phil sits beside Earl's bed as Earl asks if he knows Lily. Earl tells Phil that Lily was the love of his life and that they met as children. Earl confesses that he cheated on Lily many times over the years, but he feels guilty for his actions now. Earl tells Phil that losing Lily and Jack is the biggest regret of his life.

With the help of some coworkers, Jimmy goes home to his wife. At the same time, Claudia gets ready for her date with Jim while the police are outside looking for him. We see scenes from the beginning monologue as Earl finishes asking what he did. Phil's replacement comes, but Phil decides to finish out the night with Earl. Phil gives Earl the liquid morphine.

Claudia cries as she waits for Jim. We see each character sitting alone in their homes or cars as they cry and sing "It's not Going to Stop until You Rise Up." Everyone is alone in the terrible rain. They finish with the words "so just give up." Finally, the rains stop, and we see another weather report: Rain Clearing, Breezy Overnight.



Jim and Claudia finally go out on their date. Donnie borrows his neighbor's car. Phil answers the door and finds Jack/Frank at the door. Frank comes inside to see his father, but he has to take a moment to pull himself together. Down on the street, the little boy Jim met earlier knocks on the door of Linda's car but she doesn't respond. He climbs into the car and tries to wake her up. When she still doesn't respond, he goes through her purse and uses her phone.

Jimmy sits with Ruth, and they try to figure out how they will deal with the situation. He apologizes for cheating on her in the past. Claudia and Jim discuss how sometimes people lie on dates to look better, but Jim tells her that is only natural. He admits that he doesn't go out very often because he can't find people he wants to go out with. They make a deal that they will tell each other the truth about everything right from the beginning.

Donnie goes to his old office and retrieves some film and paperwork from a bin. Frank finally goes inside to see his father. Frank tells his father exactly what he thinks about him, none of which is flattering. He tells him that he deserves to be in pain just like Lily was in pain until the end. Frank struggles not to cry for Earl, and he tells Earl that he hates him.

The paramedics arrive to take Linda to the hospital. Ruth asks Jimmy if he feels better now that he admitted the truth. She says she's not mad. However, Ruth says she's not through asking questions. She asks why Claudia doesn't talk to him. He says he doesn't know, but Ruth doesn't believe him. Claudia comes back from the restroom at the restaurant and kisses Jim quickly on the cheek. She is afraid that he will learn about her life and not like her anymore. She feels that he has his whole life together. He admits that he lost his gun that day and looked like a fool to a lot of people. He reassures her that she can tell him anything, and he won't judge her. Finally, they kiss.

Jimmy tells Ruth that Claudia thinks Jimmy may have molested her. When she walked out the door ten years before, she told him that he touched her wrong. Ruth asks if he ever touched her, and he says he really doesn't know. Ruth breaks down and tells him that he deserves to die alone for what he's done. He asks if she'd stay if he knew what he'd done, but she says that he should know better. Ruth then leaves. Back at Claudia's apartment, Claudia begs Jim to never see her again and runs inside.

Frank struggles with his emotions as he sits by Earl's bed, watched by Phil. The ambulance with Linda in it passes Donnie as he sits in his car trying to figure out what he's doing. He does a U-turn and heads back toward the office. When he can't get in, he tries to climb the wall. Jim sees him and turns around to investigate. Jimmy wanders around his house alone and pulls out his gun. As Jim drives through the street, two large frogs fall onto the windshield of his car. Suddenly, the sky begins raining frogs. At her apartment, Claudia takes another hit of crack. She hears strange noises outside and sees frogs falling from the sky.

At Earl's house, Phil listens in horror as the frogs begin falling. Ruth wrecks her car in the chaos, and the ambulance careens through the streets, falling on its side. As Jimmy



puts his gun to his temple, a frog suddenly falls through the window on him. Donnie falls from the side of the building as he is hit by the frogs. Alone in his room, Stanley watches the frogs and say that this is just something that happens. Earl wakes up to the noise and finds Frank sitting beside him. Then he closes his eyes and breathes.

So Now Then

"And there was the account of the hanging of three men, and a scuba diver and the suicide. There are stories of coincidence and chance, of intersections and strange things told, and which is which and who only knows; and we generally say, 'Well, if that was in a movie, I wouldn't believe it. Someone's so and so met someone else's so and so on.' And, it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that strange things happen all the time and so it goes and so it goes, and the book says, 'We may be through with the past, but the past ain't through with us.'"

Phil answers the door and lets two men in black suits inside. They cover up the dead body of Earl, and we see the dog lying dead on the floor as well. Earl is wheeled out with his dog. Frank wakes up at the house, and Phil hands him the phone with a call about Linda from the hospital. Phil cries as he cleans up from Earl's death. Frank goes to visit Linda, who is awake and being checked into the hospital. Stanley goes into his father's room and tells him that he has to be nice to him. His father tells him to go to bed, and Stanley walks away.

Donnie tells Jim that he did a stupid thing getting braces to make Brad love him. Donnie cries that he has love to give but doesn't know where to put it. We see a frog fall to the ground behind them. Jim tells Donnie that his job is a 24-hour deal even though most people don't understand that or realize how hard it is to do the right thing. He says, "Sometimes people need a little help. Sometimes they need to be forgiven. And, sometimes they need to go to jail. And, it's a very tricky thing on my part - making that call. The law is the law and the heck if I'm going to break it. You can forgive someone. Well, that's the tough part. What can we forgive? The tough part of the job; the tough part of walking down the street."

Claudia sits alone in her room and listens as Jim reminds her of the deal they made. He tells her that he thinks she is wonderful, and she seems to begin trusting him as she breaks into a smile.



Characters

Frank T.J. Mackey, played by Tom Cruise

Description

Frank T.J. Mackey is a celebrated speaker who helps men seduce women. He instills confidence in his seminar participants and helps them see that they can woo any woman - even women that they meet on the street for a few moments. Frank presents an attitude that he can never be beaten. He is in charge of every situation and seems to have no need for others.

Frank is the son of Earl Partridge, the producer of *What Do Kids Know?* The two no longer speak because Earl left when Frank was young, and Frank had to care for his dying mother. Frank never forgave Earl and does not care that Earl is dying.

Analysis

Frank is a selfish, but hurting man. Because of his past pain from his father, Frank tries to control everything: thus, his seminar on seducing women. Frank enjoys seduction because he feels that he is in control of the situation, which means he cannot be hurt. When the interviewer begins to reveal his lies, Frank closes up and sits silently until the interview ends.

Eventually, Frank goes to see his dying father. He is there as Earl dies, and he tells Earl all the terrible things he always wanted to say to him. However, when Earl dies, Frank sits by his side, weeping - perhaps for the lost time and his lost life spent hating his father.

Linda Partridge, played by Julianne Moore

Description

Linda Partridge is Earl's new wife. She is quite a bit younger than him, and she is terribly distressed by his condition. For years, Linda cheated on Earl and treated him badly, but now that he is dying she realizes that she loves him. Linda is upset by this realization, and she seeks help from all corners. She finally tries to kill herself to avoid having to make a difficult choice about Earl's will.

Analysis

As Earl's end comes near, Linda becomes very distressed. She now loves Earl, but she has treated him so badly that she does not want any of his money, the reason she first married him. Linda tries to convince the lawyer to take her out of the will, but when he



refuses, she visits her doctor and convinces the doctor to give her some medicine to take away some of the pain. In her distress, Linda tries to kill herself, but she is found and rushed to the hospital.

Quiz Kid Donnie Smith, played by William H. Macy

Description

Quiz Kid Donnie Smith was once a huge winner on the show *What Do Kids Know?* Donnie won a lot of money on the show, but his parents kept every penny and spent it on themselves. As an adult, Donnie is still hooked on the fact that he lost the show and that his parents cheated him out of what was rightfully his.

Analysis

Donnie is a depressed, childish man. He cannot seem to get past the mistakes and wrongs of his past—both what he did and what others did against him. For most of the film, we wonder if Donnie has ever grown up, but when he finally experiences true kindness from Jim, he seems to come to his senses.

Phil Parma, played by Phillip Seymour Hoffman

Description

Phil is Earl's nurse at home while he is dying. Phil has been a good companion to Earl, and he has come to care about the old man. When Earl asks Phil to find his son, Frank, Phil is happy to help, even when that means making Linda angry.

Analysis

Phil is a kind man who is willing to do anything to help his employer. He even goes against Linda's instructions to find Frank and convince him to come see his father before he dies.

Stanley Spector, played by Jeremy Blackman

Description

Stanley is a brilliant boy who is the reigning champ on the game show *What Do Kids Know?* Stanley spends his school time alone in the library studying and is driven by his father. Stanley feels lonely and neglected, and he finally tells Jimmy Gator and the world how he feels one night on the show.



Analysis

When we first meet Stanley he is a timid boy. He is driven by father's desire for money and obsession with winning. After wetting his pants, Stanley decides that he is tired of being pushed around. On his last night on the game, Stanley tells Jimmy Gator and the world that he is tired of being used and manipulated. Stanley has grown strong enough to take control of his own life.

Claudia Wilson Gator, played by Melora Walters

Description

Claudia Wilson Gator is the daughter of game show host, Jimmy Gator. Claudia is in her twenties and is a coke addict.

Analysis

Claudia feels that she is a bad person because of her addiction. She first got into drugs because she was sexually molested by her father, Jimmy. Claudia has never been able to move past those experiences, but meeting Jim renews her hope.

Jimmy Gator, played by Phillip Baker Hall

Description

Jimmy Gator is Claudia's father and the host of *What Do Kids Know?*. Jimmy has cancer and will be dead in a few months. He tries to reconnect with Claudia, his estranged daughter, but she rejects him. Jimmy collapses during the show and is taken home by friends. At home, his wife, Ruth, starts asking Jimmy why Claudia is so angry with him. He admits to her that Claudia believes that he sexually abused her, and he also admits that he is not sure that he didn't. His wife leaves him, and the last time we see Jimmy, he is holding a gun in his hand.

Analysis

Jimmy is a kind, business-like man. He has spent years as the host of *What Do Kids Know?*. Now that he is dying, Jimmy tries to make amends for his wrongs, but no one is ready to hear his confessions or to give him a second chance.



Earl Partridge, played by Jason Robards

Description

Earl Partridge is the dying producer of *What Do Kids Know?* Earl is dying of cancer, and his wife, Linda, tries to stay out of the house most of the time; she cannot bear to be around with Earl in this condition. As he is dying, Earl asks his nurse, Phil, to help him get in touch with his son, Frank.

Analysis

We do not know much about Earl except that he left Frank alone as a child. Earl was scared of dealing with his wife's death and neglected his son. Now that he is dying, Earl wants forgiveness from his son, Frank.

Jim Kurring, played by John C. Reilly

Description

Jim is a police officer in the city. He meets Claudia when he is out on the job one day and receives a call about a domestic disturbance. Jim is a kind man who tries to treat everyone fairly and who begins to fall for Claudia. Even though she tries to convince him to leave, he returns to her in the end.

Analysis

Jim cares about people, and he wants to do the best for them. Although he often has difficulty determining what is best, he is willing to give people like Claudia and Donnie a second chance.

Narrator, played by Ricky Jay

Description

The narrator tells the events of coincidence at the beginning and the end of the film.

Analysis

The narrator remains hidden from view, but helps us to put the events of the film into perspective with his discussions about coincidental events.



Themes

Strange Things Happen

Throughout the movie, we see that strange things happen all the time. When we consider life from a normal viewpoint, we often fail to notice the strange things that happen. Alternatively, we see the strange things, and admit to ourselves that had those things happened in a movie, we would never have believed they were true. How is it that one event can change the course of entire lives or connect people who otherwise would never have been connected?

Magnolia explores how all the strange things that happen connect at some point, in some way. Even if we would not believe the events in a movie, they happen in real life all the time. In the past century, three deaths occurred by coincidence, and on this night, many more happen in the same way. Coincidence brings all the people in the film together for a moment when they all experience a death or a re-birth of some kind.

We Are All Connected

The connections between people are emphasized in *Magnolia*. We see that every character in the film is in some way connected to all the others. For example, Frank and Phil are connected by the dying Earl Partridge. The only reason Phil meets Frank or Frank comes to the house is because of Earl's request to see his son one last time.

In the same way, former Quiz Kid Donnie Smith and current Quiz Kid Stanley are connected even though they never meet. Both were young geniuses who made their debuts on *What Do Kids Know?* Stanley is a brilliant young man, but he is kept away from his peers so that he can study for the show all the time. Donnie is now a grown man who is bitter that his parents stole his money and who cannot get over the glory days of his youth. Stanley begins to speak for himself toward the end of the film, and we hope that his statement of freedom and self-reliance will keep him from ending up in the same condition as Donnie Smith, who spent his life wishing he could be back to a time of fame and recover the money his parents stole from him.

Everyone in the film has a connection of one sort or another to everyone else, and viewers are reminded that we are never truly alone. There is always someone who is better off or worse off than we, and eventually we all end up connected.

Speak Up

Many of the characters in *Magnolia* have just been floating through life, letting their past circumstances and other peoples' decisions determine how they live their lives. For example, Frank has spent his life teaching other men how to seduce women, thus ignoring his past dealing with a dying mother and neglectful father. In the same way,



Claudia never told anyone that her father sexually abused her. Because she kept quiet, she is now trying to cover up her pain by using drugs and spending her life trapped inside her apartment.

Those who speak up are the ones who survive, and eventually many of the characters in the film begin to speak up for themselves and their rights. Quiz Kid Donnie Smith steps up in a bar and tells everyone there just how rough his life has been. Although he seems to be losing it a bit, he does get out all the hurt and anger he has kept pinned inside for all these years. Stanley also speaks up and tells the whole world how he feels about being manipulated and used so that his father can make money and *What Do Kids Know?* can have good ratings. Speaking up releases the hurtful energy, and when that is gone, the characters can go on with their lives.

Style and Cinematography

Anderson creates an intense, intricate film with his masterpiece, *Magnolia*. He uses symbolism to create a type of consistency throughout the film. Although all the stories seem to be completely separate at the beginning of the film, by the end the characters have come out of their isolation and have bonded with others.

One of Anderson's greatest uses of symbolism in the film is the constant references to the numbers 8 and 2. Exodus 8:2 says, "And if thou refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all thy borders with frogs." Throughout the film, he refers to these chapter and verse numbers. For example, in the bar scene there is a chalkboard listing two teams, the Frogs and the Clouds; the score of their game is eight to two. Also note that the kids on *What Do Kids Know?* were two days away from entering their eighth week as champions. Other examples of these numbers include the weather forecast predicting an 82% chance of rain; the first temperature reading; and the placard on the hanged convicts. In addition, right after Jim Kurring sees Donnie Smith climbing up the building, you can see a flash of a sign on the side of the road that says Exodus 8:2 (it's visible again when the frogs fall and hit Kurring's car). When noticed, these references give a sense of consistency to the film and foreshadow what is to come.

Another instance of symbolism that helps hold the film together is the references to magnolias. Not only is the film named *Magnolia*, but much of the action takes place on Magnolia Boulevard. Additionally, every living room in the film has a picture of a flower, reminding viewers of the theme of interconnectedness.



Motifs

Circle Story

Magnolia ends in the same place it began-with the stories of the three coincidental deaths in the past century. The stories are told to show how coincidence can change lives. The lives of all the people in these stories were changed by coincidental events. For example, a son is killed because he was planning to help put his parents out of their marital misery while at the same time committing suicide to put himself out of his own misery. These random events show the connections between people and the importance of coincidence, or fate if you prefer, in our lives.

Since the story makes a circle, viewers can begin to understand Anderson's themes and points. When the random stories first play on the screen at the beginning of the film, they make little sense. However, by the end of the film, the stories begin to make more sense, and the narrator helps pull the story together with his final thoughts about life.

The setup of the story is a primary tool the director used to move people toward the points he wanted to make clear. With the first talk of the coincidental events, the viewer begins wondering what the film is all about, but by the end of the film, when the stories come back to the forefront, their meaning and placement makes much more sense.

Weather Reports

The weather reports in the film help create the mood. As soon as you see a weather report, you know that things in the movie are about to change and the reports tell exactly how they are going to change. Throughout the film, the weather reports change intermittently, providing a short intrusion into the rest of the film and separating various parts of the film.

Before the rains come, strong and heavy, the weather reports predict that there will be rain. The interesting part of the film is that all the action takes place within one day. Since this is the case, one could assume that the weather reports come at important times during the evening - one is in the early morning, one at noon, and another in the evening. The reports help us gauge how the characters will act and what they will experience in the next section of the film.

The weather reports also provide a much-needed break for the audience. Anderson is known to keep his films moving at a fast pace, and the scene changes every few seconds. The weather reports provide a moment of calm and quiet so the audience can begin to evaluate everything they have seen thus far. After this short respite, the next section of the film can make more sense.

Symbols

Magnolias

Magnolias are interesting flowers. Each flower has many petals that all meet in the center. In every room shown in the film, there is at least one picture of flowers. Throughout the film, we are reminded that everyone is connected in some way. Every character has some connection to the film *What Do Kids Know?* Thus, they all have connections to each other as well. The magnolia symbolizes that they are all connected.

The magnolia symbolizes the interconnectedness all of us. No matter how alone we may feel at times, we are always somehow connected to others. Anderson tends to focus on the isolation of people, especially those in the suburbs, and how eventually, in order to survive, people must come to terms with their lives and learn to live in harmony with others. By the end of the film every person has begun re-evaluating his or her life and has tried to promote peace and harmony among the others.

Frogs

Although Anderson at first claimed to be unaware that the story of frogs falling from the sky was in the Bible, he eventually used the story to add to his film. Throughout the film, references are made to Exodus 8:2, which reads: "And if thou refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all thy borders with frogs." The frogs are one of the plagues God uses to convince Egypt's Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave his country.

When the frogs begin to fall, everyone has to fight for their lives. Many of the characters remain inside but others seek cover elsewhere. Some also come together and help one another. This random, strange event causes all the characters to re-evaluate their lives, and many of them make important choices. Jim goes back to Claudia and begs her to let him into her life. At the same time, he lets Donnie go free of the crimes he has committed. Frank makes his peace with Earl, and everyone becomes even more closely connected. In the end, the strange events of the day, concluding with the frogs, causes all the characters to come out of their isolation and interact with others.

Random Events

As we see the random events shown at the beginning of the film, we do not really understand why they are being shown. Later, we realize that these random events happen constantly even though we might not believe that such things happen. The random events eventually link a lot of different people.

In *Magnolia*, many different people are linked by random events. From the first scenes, we see that everyone is either a fan or somehow involved with the show *What Do Kids Know?* This one game show links everyone. Donnie and Stanley are linked simply by

the fact that they have both been participants in the show. Earl and Jimmy are linked because Jimmy is the host and Earl is the producer of the show. Everyone has a connection.

However, some connections are more random than others. Jim Kurring just happens to get called to Claudia's apartment, while he meets Donnie on the side of the street after the rain of frogs is over. Although all these random events seem unrelated at first, and indeed for a good portion of the film, they actually forge a connection between all these people. In the end, we see that everyone is connected, and the random events at the beginning of the movie were a symbol of these connections.



Essay Questions

What is the significance of the montage of events shown at the beginning of the film?

How has the life of Quiz Kid Donnie Smith turned out?

Describe Frank's personality as revealed through his interview.

Why does Linda not want the money from Earl's will?

How does Claudia and Jim's relationship develop?

What does Phil promise Earl he will do?

What horrible thing did Jimmy do?

Describe the relationship between Stanley and his father.

How does Stanley feel that he is perceived by others? Do events in the film make his perception seem accurate?

What is the symbolism of the frogs?

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