

A Serious Man (2009)

“Receive with simplicity everything that happens”

--Rashi

Major Credits:

Directors: Joel and Ethan Coen

Script: Joel and Ethan Coen

Cinematography: Roger Deakins

Editing: Roderick Jaynes (pseudonym for Joel and Ethan Coen)

Music: Carter Burwell

Cast: Michael Stuhlbarg (Larry Gopnik); Richard Kind (Uncle Arthur); Fred Melamed (Sy Abelman); Sari Lennick (Judith Gopnik); Amy Landecker (Mrs. Samsky)

Background:

Following the success of *No Country for Old Men* (2007), the Coen brothers felt free to return to an uncharacteristically personal story that they had been thinking about for many years. Set in 1967 in an upper Midwest suburbia like the one outside Minneapolis in which they were raised, *A Serious Man* draws upon Joel's and Ethan's memories as it re-tells the Biblical tale of Job. Although generally praised by critics (earning a Best Picture nomination from the Academy under its newly expanded system of selecting ten movies instead of five), the film, perhaps not surprisingly, did not generate the same buzz as their multiple Oscar-winning Western. Nevertheless, it remains one of their most skillfully crafted works, one that manages to be both painfully funny and deeply disturbing. Its reputation will almost surely grow.

Cinematic Elements:

1. The Yiddish prologue, with its narrowed frame, sepia tone, and focused lighting, evokes both the style of silent movies and the vernacular language and storytelling of the Yiddish theatre. Although the Coens have explicitly denied any relevance to the modern story, the prologue clearly resonates with the themes and tone of the rest of *A Serious Man*.
2. Music: The Coens again collaborate with their favorite composer, Carter Burwell, and the film's eclectic score—from the Jefferson Airplane's "Don't You Want Somebody to Love" to Sidor Belarsky's melancholy Yiddish song "The Miller's Tears"—reinforces the film's shifts from hallucination and dream to comedy and melodrama.
3. Cross Cutting: Particularly at the beginning and end, the editing (credited to Roderick Jaynes but recognized by cinephiles as a pseudonym for the Coens themselves) underscores the dual story lines that converge in the script: father's and son's.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Extending the theme of Fate that was embodied by Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*, the Coen brothers here deploy the dilemma represented in quantum mechanics by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle as opposed to Professor Gopnik's insistence that, as he tells the Korean student, "Actions always have consequences." The student's apparently corrupt but possibly wise father cryptically advises Larry, in words that echo Rashi's, to "accept the mystery." Where does the film ultimately stand on the enduring theme of free will vs. fate?

2. Beginning with the prologue, the film embeds several stories-within-the-story. This foregrounding of storytelling over verisimilitude is what critics presumably mean when they label the Coens “postmodernist” filmmakers. Some of these stories appear to be fables. What, for example, is the meaning of the elaborate tale of “The Goy’s Teeth”? Is there a moral that can be ascribed to *A Serious Man*, or is the moral simply that there is no moral?

3. Unlike *Fargo*, *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, and *No Country for Old Men*, crime movie, film noir, and Western respectively, *A Serious Man* seems to be a generic hybrid. Is it a comedy or a melodrama? Contemporary reviewers have created the term *dramedy* to define this kind of mixed genre that has emerged in the past decade on television (e.g., the Coen brothers’ production of the tv series *Fargo*) as well as in the movies. But given their characteristic sardonic tone, the deliberately unrealistic heaping of misfortune on poor Larry, and the misdirection provoked by several dream sequences, can we regard the film itself as ultimately “serious”?

4. A few critics have berated the Coens for perpetuating negative stereotypes of Jews (Ella Taylor’s piece in *The Village Voice* being the most prominent of these attacks). Do you believe the accusations of anti-semitism or Jewish self-hatred are warranted? Note that the credits end with the line, “No Jews were harmed in the making of this motion picture.”

5. *A Serious Man* offers a rather different portrait of America at the brink of the late 1960s than has been perpetuated by films since *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Woodstock* (1970). In creating a *period film* (like *Miller’s Crossing* and *Barton Fink*), how do the Coen brothers represent the American culture of their youth? Consider the high angle shot of the American flag in the impending storm at the very end of the film.

Glossary of Yiddish Terms:

Although these expressions may be unfamiliar to some viewers, consider how the Coens make certain their meaning will be clear within the context of the plot.

- *Hashem* : The respectful term for God used in conversation
- *Kabbala*: Jewish mysticism from the book of Zohar
- *Shiva* : 7 days of mourning observed after the death of a loved one
- *Dybbuk*: a wandering soul of the dead
- *Lamed vovnik*: the 36 just and righteous men required by God to save the world
- *Tsuris*: misfortune or aggravating trouble
- *Naches*: pride and joy as a result of achievement or good fortune; the opposite of *tsuris*
- *Gett*: a Jewish bill of divorce
- *Agunah*: a woman whose husband will not grant a *gett*