

### Intersectionality and Representation within Green Book

Green Book is based off of a true story from 1962. There are two main characters in this film that overcome stereotypes and demonstrate how broken the world is. "Tony Lip" Vallelonga is an Italian from the Bronx, New York with a reputation well-known for being a tough guy. Don Shirley is a famous African American pianist, in pursuit of a driver, personal assistant, and security for his tour in the deep south. Don Shirley has two other band members; however, they are white and travel in a separate car. After multiple recommendations, Tony is hired for the position. The film Green Book goes against the white man privilege, disrupts typical stereotypes and norms of the 1960's, and exemplifies oppression of different races or cultural backgrounds during this time period.

Privilege is the "unearned advantages" one holds in society as a result of their identity (Killermann, 2017, p. 39). Most privileges are the start of oppression and not an opportunity one obtains by choice. Socioeconomic status is a common topic when privilege is mentioned. In the film, Tony's lifestyle differs greatly from Don Shirley's lifestyle. For example, Tony shares an apartment with his parents, brother, sister-in-law, nieces, nephews, and his own wife and children. Each family has a single bedroom they must share. Don lives alone above Carnegie Hall with many fancy decorations, including a throne. He also has an Indian man as a butler. Another difference between the two are their levels of education. Shirley is trained in classical music and is well-spoken, while Tony only knows the life of the streets in the Bronx. There are multiple scenes throughout the film where Tony is attempting to write love letters back home to his wife. Shirley teaches Tony how to write a more descriptive letter while using proper grammar and vocabulary. Also, Don talks to Tony about manners and cleaning himself up. There is a running thread throughout the film where Shirley will firmly tell Tony to do something and he suffices. For example, when the pair are enjoying Kentucky Fried Chicken, Tony tosses his cup out of the window. The next thing on the screen is the car in reverse and Shirley is reprimanding him to pick it up. To counter Shirley's advice, Tony teaches him important notes worthy of protecting himself. When the pair is leaving the Orange Bird, two men are waiting for Don to walk out in an attempt to jump him. Tony notices and shoots off a gun into the air as he tells him to "never flash a wad of cash at a bar." Skin color is another major factor of privilege due to discrimination during this time period. During the tour, Don occasionally has to stay in a separate hotel from Tony. In Louisville, Kentucky, the motel that Don Shirley was staying in was run-down and there were many folks outside playing games. Eventually they took notice of Shirley and harassed him with comments of him being too good for them. Shirley left the motel to have some drinks at a local bar. Tony is awakened to one of the band members banging on the door because Shirley is in trouble. He had entered a white bar and was beaten, bruised, and drunk out of his mind. Tony is able to threaten the men enough to let Shirley go home with him. Tony continues to protect Don throughout the film as racial oppression becomes a huge issue in the southern states.

The differences in the privileges of both men play a huge role in the stereotypes perceived. Positive and negative stereotypes are possible, however, in this film negative stereotypes are prominent. The first instance that comes to mind is Tony's wrong idea about Don's "people." These comments make Shirley uncomfortable as he does not relate to "his people" as Tony believes. Multiple times Tony uses those words to associate Don with something that southern African American people are known for. For example, when the pair arrives to Kentucky Tony insists on buying some Kentucky Fried Chicken. It is revealed that Don had never ate fried chicken, leaving Tony in bewilderment because it what "his people" are known for. Tony has

good intentions of trying to understand Don, but “good intentions don’t matter, outcomes matter” (Killerman, 2017, p. 209). A discriminatory or racial stereotype is always negative and there are plenty within Green Book. The first one that comes to mind is that African Americans are portrayed as dirty and inferior to white folks. While at a concert in Raleigh, North Carolina, Don is waiting to use the restroom inside the facility. The host approaches him and demands he must use the outhouse. Shirley once again maintains his dignity by refusing to use the outhouse. He ends up traveling back to his hotel twenty minutes away causing the concert to be start late. The host states that they will wait for him to begin. This scene exhibits how broken society was in the 1960’s because this was a socially acceptable doing.

The most common forms of oppression in Green Book include discrimination and the misrepresentation of Don Shirley’s homosexuality. Oppression is the final product of when a “social group discriminates against another social group” (Killermann, 2017, p. 20). Although this scene is short, it is one that sticks out from the film because it is revealed that Don Shirley is homosexual. While in Macon, Georgia he is caught having sexual relations with a white male at a YMCA afterhours. Tony bails him out of trouble with security by paying money for each guard to buy a new suit. Shirley is angry that he was bailed out in that manner, but Tony saw it in different light because he is paid to keep Shirley safe. In terms of racial discrimination, one must notice a difference before one is able to oppress (Killermann, 2017, p. 18). In the beginning of the film all of the men in the house stay home from work while there are two African Americans working on the house. Delores, Tony’s wife provides them with lemonade as they are working. Afterwards, the family is having lunch and Delores notices that the two glasses are in the trash and she pulls them out. This scene is vital when one notices how Tony’s demeanor changes as the film continues. There are two significant scenes where the pair is pulled over by the local police and each instance ends differently. The first scene occurs in Mississippi in a “sundown town,” meaning that African Americans must not be outside and travelling when it gets dark. It is pouring rain and the main officer forces both of them out of the car with no presentable reason. The officers are talking down towards Don and when Tony attempts to step in, he is called “half a nigger yourself” due to his Italian background. At this time immigrants were not genuinely welcomed among the United States. As a result of this unnecessary comment, Tony punches the officer and the pair end up in a jail cell. Don Shirley fights for his right to make one phone call and he calls the Attorney General of the United States and brother to the current president, Robert “Bobby” Kennedy. This greatly surprises the officers, but Don feels like garbage for having to stoop that low. He tells Tony that “you never win with violence; you only win when you maintain your dignity.” On the way to the hotel, Tony and Don get into a verbal argument about being black. Tony thinks that he is blacker than Don because of their lifestyles. Don bursts of anger, gets out of the car, and screams “if I’m not black enough, or not white enough, then what am I?” This is only time in the entire film where he truly lets his inner thoughts out without a filter. Both Don and Shirley attempt to make a statement for social justice and the poor treatment their cultures receive. The second time the pair is pulled over by the police is in a northern state. The officer noticed the tire was flat and offered to help the pair fix it so they can get home in time for Christmas dinner. Obviously, the intensity of both incidents differs greatly. The purpose of even including the second scene was to demonstrate the vast difference in treatment African Americans receive from various parts of the United States.

Don Shirley’s ultimate goal is to push against second generation stereotypes. This category of stereotyping comes from an individual internalizing belief about themselves that they

have repeatedly seen or heard throughout their lifetime. Killerman uses the example of a female never asking for a promotion because she is not as prepared as a male is for the job (Killermann, 2017, p. 21). In *Green Book*, Don Shirley could have chosen to have his tour in northern states or stopped his tour when he first experienced discrimination, but he continued to persist. Shirley explains that Nat King Cole had people attack him during his performance at the some of the same locations he played and it “takes courage to change people’s hearts.” This scene best summarizes the film with the empowering message of rising up and making a peaceful statement for a positive change. Although Don Shirley does not play his final concert in Birmingham due to the discrimination within the dining room, his actions caught the African American waiters’ attention. As Tony is attempting to make arrangements for Shirley to eat dinner, he announces with dignity that he would play the concert with Tony’s approval. By the end of the film, Tony has become a respectable man and great friends with Don Shirley. This film overcomes socioeconomic privilege, multiple stereotypes, and many instances of oppression regarding homosexuality and racial or cultural backgrounds.

## References

- Killermann, S. (2017). *A guide to gender: the social justice advocates handbook*. Austin, TX.: Impetus Books.
- Universal Pictures. (2018). *Green book*.