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Sideways

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Sideways

Abstract

This is a review of *Sideways* (2004).

Sideways is a film that has met with wide affection, in part because of the film's focus on sun and wine, an attribute that reportedly has boosted tourism in California's wine valleys. The film's warm reception also has to do with romance, a topic not unrelated to wine and sun. Directed by Alexander Payne who also made *About Schmidt* in 2002 and *Election* in 1999, *Sideways* shares an even more important theme with those other acclaimed films: all three present very ordinary, very flawed men in need of something very like redemption.

Miles Raymond (Paul Giamatti) is a man with some hard miles behind him, indeed. The movie opens when he is sound asleep. There is pounding on his door for he has forgotten to move his car so that there can be repairs to his apartment building. He is a man in the dark, a man without repairs. He is to take a trip with his college roommate, Jack (Thomas Haden Church), but Miles lies and even steals from his own mother before the trip is fairly begun. It is no wonder that some filmgoers see nothing of interest or value in Miles. There isn't much of either. Yet that, it is said, is how redemption works: even liars, even thieves, even worse.

Sideways is a buddy movie and a road-movie, a bit like Martin and Lewis. Miles' pal, Jack, is about to get married so the two of them head for California wine-country, where Jack indulges his puppy-dog womanizing and Miles indulges his oenophilia. Both are brought up short, and that's just what this particular combination of roads and a buddy brings about: not a doubling of the fun in ever-

new places, but a mirroring of just how self-destructive, how empty, how lost one can become when the distractions of home are gone. Jack, it turns out, will be the puppy to the end, but Miles experiences a turn that opens him to what just may be redemption.

In a much-noted column, Sally Quinn of *The Washington Post* excoriated the film for mis-matching these two men with the women of the film, Maya (Virginia Madsen) and Stephanie (Sandra Oh). The women, she insisted, are too good for the men. It is nothing but a male fantasy. Perhaps. It might be said, as well, that the film presents the tired theme of a woman saving a man. Quite possibly. Yet even if those accusations are just, the film itself is redeemed by its central theme. It's that fine a theme, and that well done. Miles' redemptive turn begins when Jack and Stephanie are copulating quite loudly in bed, yet he and Maya are the intimate ones, discussing wine. Miles describes his love of pinot noir because it is "thin-skinned" and so difficult to cultivate, and we understand that he is awkwardly describing himself. Maya describes the life that exists in a bottle of wine, the mixture of soil, and sun, and grape that tastes different on the day it is opened than any other day, unless it suddenly and irrevocably declines before it is ever uncorked. Miles, we come to see, is in a bottle, but there is a life, even inside a bottle, even one as unattractive and bitter as he is; even one who steals from his own mother; even, perhaps, one who is already far into his own decline.

The second crucial moment in Miles' redemption comes when he views Jack's bottoming out. It's a ludicrous consequence of Jack's womanizing, a moment when the comedy becomes farce and then suddenly very serious, as the never-serious Jack is literally and emotionally naked. The camera stops for several extra-beats on Miles's face. It is a moment of acute self-recognition. Payne is subtle enough not to move Miles abruptly from sideways to upright. His unpublished novel is not suddenly published. His ex-wife does not return. Maya does not proclaim her love. Instead, Miles is able to face a threshold, simply that. And for all those who found *Sideways* so appealing, that is redemption enough.