Seger Note #5: Green Book

Screenplay by Nick Vallelonga & Brian Currie & Peter Farrelly

Directed by Peter Farrelly

Academy Award, Best Original Screenplay and Best Picture

Racism is one of the great themes in films and novels. *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Mississippi Burning* explore the intersection of justice and racism. *The Help* takes us inside systemic racism in the South by portraying the awakening of a young white journalist and the lived experience of Black maids. We see personal courage and the fight against social injustice in movies like *Mandela* and *Cry Freedom*, and the fight against workplace injustice in *Hidden Figures*. Racism is personalized as we see the gradual transformation of two characters as they move through their own escape from bigotry in *The Defiant Ones*.

A theme is not the same thing as a message, to be hammered like a lecture or a sermon. But a great theme can be transformative, as it resonates with viewers' own experiences, opening their eyes and calling on their empathy as they journey with the characters through the story.

Green Book explores the transformation of attitudes and action within and between two individuals. It's primarily a personal story, like *The Defiant Ones*, but during the latter part of Act Two and Act Three, it broadens to include the social story as well.

Exploring the Theme of Identity

Racism, and all the other isms, like sexism and ageism, can be seen as subsets of the broader theme of Identity. This is one of the most universal themes in film.

Many films explore the questions "Who am I?" and "Who am I becoming as a result of the events in the story?" In earlier Seger Notes, we can see other examples of transformation. Both characters in *The African Queen* blossom as a result of their love and as a result of their mission: they are different people at the end of the film than they were at the beginning. In *Shakespeare in Love*, Will finds his muse in the one he loves. She generates his creative spark, helping him expand his identity to become the Great Shakespeare. In *Jojo Rabbit*, Jojo discovers that he isn't really a Nazi.

Green Book works with this theme of identity by continually reversing expectations. Sometimes it reverses the expectations which one character has about the other. Sometimes it reverses the audience's expectations as we see characters break their stereotypes. Each act takes us more deeply into the unraveling of presumptions.

Racism depends on us holding to our stereotypes. Overcoming racism demands that our presumptions are shattered. In most cases, this happens through a process, rather than through one single event.

Tony Lipp is set up as what we'd expect a bouncer to be: lower-class, a bit shady and manipulative, good at solving potentially violent situations and strong enough to match anyone who crosses lines, someone who knows the ropes and can read situations and the people involved. He falls neatly into the character archetype of the Bouncer—if there is such an archetype. In contrast, Dr. Don Shirley immediately smashes the stereotype of the Black man. He doesn't live in a poor section of New York. He doesn't live among a Black population, such as might be found in Harlem or parts of Brooklyn or the Bronx. He lives in a gorgeous apartment above one of the greatest music recital halls in the world, Carnegie Hall. (A side note: I sang in a choir which performed at Carnegie Hall in 2015. It was a thrill!)

The first story beat in which expectations are reversed occurs when Tony goes to the address he's given. He doesn't expect to be at Carnegie Hall, and he certainly doesn't expect to meet a Black man who looks like a prince. The second story beat shows him in a gorgeous apartment filled with beautiful objects: ivory tusks, a throne chair, a very grand grand piano—everything elegant and expensive.

Dr. Shirley has far more class than Tony. He's got a great car, a 1962 Cadillac DeVille sedan. He's got fine leather suitcases. Expensive suits. Even a cozy red blanket to lay over his lap. By the time they leave New York, any stereotypical ideas we might have about Dr. Shirley as a Black man have been broken. We might ask, "Who is this man?" We find we can't come to his character with any preconceptions. We have to stay with the story to find out.

Act One establishes the situation and prepares us for the intersection and interaction of these two men. Act Two creates two narrative lines that look at the issue of identity, both personally and socially.

We in the audience experience the same surprises the characters experience. We might think, early on, that we have Dr. Shirley figured out. But just like the sheriffs and the hotel managers and various friends, we are all wrong. We have to discover his character in the same way that we learn about a person when we don't plaster our own stereotypes on that person. We observe. We engage. We try to stay open to each surprise.

Tony is forced to start changing his perception of Dr. Don Shirley from the moment he meets him. He looks for clues, and grabs at anything he knows in order to reinforce his perceptions of this surprising man. When Dr. Shirley speaks a foreign language, Tony figures he must be speaking German. Tony knows something about Germany and Germans, and so he jumps to conclusions. But he's totally wrong. It's Russian, which Dr. Shirley learned when he studied at the prestigious Leningrad Music Conservatory. Later, Tony thinks he's safe using Italian, but Dr. Shirley knows Italian as well—and probably other languages too.

Tony launches a subject of conversation that he thinks he knows about, telling Dr. Shirley that his wife listened to his recording about orphans. Wrong again. Dr. Shirley's recording was of *Orpheus*, and those little children on the record cover were really demons.

Perhaps one of the greatest changes of perception for Tony comes the first time he hears Dr. Shirley play the piano. Early in Act Two, Tony stands in the doorway as his boss plays, and he simply cannot believe what he's hearing. This man is exceptional.

He has not just one doctorate, but several. He's also a good writer, as we will see when he helps Tony with his letters to Dolores, which are poetic and filled with similes and metaphors and yearning and romance.

And then, Tony's understanding is changed again. Dr. Shirley gets drunk and beaten at a low-class bar. He's discovered at the YMCA with another man in a compromising position. They share their backstories, and Tony learns that Dr. Shirley has a brother and an ex-wife. Whereas family is very important to Tony, Dr. Shirley is not good at the relationship side of things. He's isolated and lonely. The professional becomes personal when they share a drink at a hotel and talk about music and Chopin—a composer Dr. Shirley is rarely able to play because Whites can't accept a Black man playing Chopin. Tony's eyes are consistently open to who Dr. Shirley is. By the Second Turning Point, he stands up for Dr. Shirley not only because it's his job, but because he can't bear to have Dr. Shirley denigrated.

Just as Tony changes his perception of Dr. Shirley, Dr. Shirley changes his perception of himself.

This could also be considered a stage in overcoming racism. An oppressed person has an identity planted on them. Though they may grapple with their own identity in a personal sense, their outward identity is constantly affirmed through the eyes of society's racial stereotyping. The person suffering the stereotype always has to figure out whether another person's dislike is personal or part of a racist (or misogynist) stereotype.

Dr. Shirley has worked hard throughout his life to make sure he is not identified as poor, as uneducated, as part of Black culture, as like those other people that are part of his race. He doesn't want to be considered lower-class, or to fit into the perception of Blacks as servants. He doesn't want to eat fried chicken—it's Southern. He doesn't want to eat with his hands. He believes in good vocabulary, no profanity, and in being nonviolent. He wants to stand apart. But in denying the stereotype, he also denies the great talents and contributions of his culture.

Act Two further develops the idea that Dr. Shirley has not accepted his Black culture. Although Tony talks about it in terms of the stereotype that all Blacks love

Little Richard and Chubby Checker and Aretha Franklin, it is clear that Tony loves and appreciates them and doesn't understand how a Black man, especially, wouldn't be in awe of them. Tony opens Dr. Shirley's eyes to the wonders of Black culture through the portal of music. Dr. Shirley discovers that fried chicken really is "finger lickin' good" and it's fun to eat with your hands and throw the bones out the window. He's willing by Act Three to go to a Black bar, rather than the White bar he goes to in Act Two.

Just as we can't easily peg Dr. Shirley, we can quickly figure out Tony. During Act Two, as we're seeing Dr. Shirley in a new light, the "Italian bouncer" stereotype of Tony continues to be reinforced: he smokes, he chomps on his food in the car, he talks too much, he seems to steal merchandise at a rock store, and he stands firm about anyone taking advantage of him. He refuses to move Dr. Shirley's luggage or do his laundry—which is a reversal of other expectations, because those who serve are expected to kowtow and do whatever is asked of them. Tony knows his role but he won't let anyone take advantage of him. He's the driver and the strongman. He'll do his job and he's got the muscle and the experience to take care of trouble.

Even so, during Act Two, Tony moves beyond Dr. Shirley's stereotypes, and our own. He's a really good guy with a big heart. He's sensitive. Caring. And more than just a driver—he becomes a friend. He doesn't break the stereotype. He expands and dimensionalizes it, moving his character past the stereotype into a well-rounded human being.

And as our picture of Tony changes, he too is transformed. He not only changes his attitude toward Dr. Shirley, he changes his attitude toward society. Whereas in Act One (as I'll discuss below), he unconsciously acquiesced to racist social attitudes, now he sees clearly what is going on. These racists should not be allowed to keep doing what they're doing—and neither Dr. Shirley nor Tony should have anything to do with them. He stands up to the Whites who are causing problems for the man who has become his friend. Enough is enough!

The qualities that make Tony a good bouncer in a club expand into the troublesome society of the South. Tony confronts Dr. Shirley about his treatment: "You told me you never stay at a place that didn't want you, so why the hell would you play at a joint

where they don't treat you with the respect you deserve?" And at this point, having come this far in the story, Dr. Shirley agrees. He even picks up Tony's vocabulary: "Let's get the fuck out of here" (p. 103).

By Act Three, Dr. Shirley still has two more transformations to go through. First, he needs to have the freedom to play the music he loves, which he does on a beat-up piano at the Black bar, where he finds camaraderie and support and freedom. He can even play Chopin there, rather than conforming to the White people's idea of a Christmas recital. (In the screenplay he plays a Tchaikovsky concerto, while in the movie he plays a Chopin étude.) And finally, he moves from being a solitary, very lonely man to being willing to join Tony and his family for Christmas.

Tracing the Theme Through the Structure

Let's track the theme of racism through the three acts. The society doesn't change, but we see different aspects of it as we move from Act One to Act Two to Act Three.

In Act One, we don't really see racism. The Italians seem fairly well integrated within their own group, but if you look more closely, they are in supportive roles rather than leadership or professional roles. Tony's initial action shows him to be a subversive character. He takes a rich patron's special hat, so that when he returns it, he's given a good tip for finding it. But of course it wasn't lost it all; it was just hidden, so that Tony would get the tip when he returned it.

This shows us an aspect of racism and sexism which is fairly prevalent: to gain power, the oppressed person often has to be a little underhanded, not absolutely honest. They usually have to be conciliatory, even overly polite. If you watch television episodes from the 1950s, you'll see the subversive female figuring out how to get what she wants from the guy in power. (I suggest multiple episodes of *I Love Lucy*, because you can laugh while becoming aware of how this works.) Watch films about slavery or about Black servants, and notice how they need to be secretive or conciliatory on the outside while being rebellious on the inside. Often their dialogue has double meanings.

From the very first scene of *Green Book*, we get a hint of how inequality works, and the different cultures it affects. We see that although Tony is discriminated against partly because of his place in the social hierarchy, this is also a function of a society that is systemically racist in its modes of thought. Everyone has their place, and they are expected to stay there. Tony buys into this idea. There are lines he won't cross (such as doing laundry for Dr. Shirley), but he knows his job: to drive and protect Dr. Shirley.

Racism depends on a social agreement about how things should be. It breaks up when a class of people leaves the place they're assigned to by that social agreement and start to elbow their way into the space assigned to another class. Or, they decide not to collude anymore and break the contract.

It's a shake-up, and both Tony and Dr. Shirley know a bit about shake-ups. But they go about it in different ways, as a reflection of their individual characters. And both learn that there is more than one way to shake up a rock-solid structure.

The first half of Act Two occurs in the North, where racism is more subtle and less overtly dangerous. True, the company does try to get by without giving Dr. Shirley his Steinway grand piano in Indiana, prompting Tony to confront the establishment and get what Dr. Shirley wants. Still, Dr. Shirley is allowed to eat and drink with Tony and welcomed into the mainly white hotels.

At the Midpoint, things change. They enter the South when they enter Kentucky. In the second half of Act Two, a series of events demonstrates the open racism of that time. Dr. Shirley must stay in a horrible hotel, clearly and truly beneath his dignity. He's beaten when he goes to a bar. The Black people working the cotton fields are bewildered by him. He can't use the bathroom, even though it's down the hall from where he gives his piano recital. He can't buy a suit at the White store. He's jailed, along with Tony. Mistreatment, stereotypes, and disrespect are daily challenges.

If we didn't understand social racism before, we get a good picture of it throughout Act Two: at first subtle, then blatant and legally encoded.

As we start Act Three, we wonder: Have both Dr. Shirley and Tony been transformed enough by the events of Act Two so that their behavior in Act Three will be

significantly different? How will these two men deal with the ugly racism they're sure to meet in Birmingham? Should they confront it, or should they just let it go?

We learned at about 65 minutes into the film that Dr. Shirley asked to go to the South, and he knew what he was getting into. He was determined to right a wrong that occurred when he and Nat King Cole went to the South to perform some years ago and were beaten—an injustice that had been gnawing at him for years. Without Tony, he might simply have made his point by being a Black man playing popular piano in the South, and letting his presence make a statement. He didn't expect to overtly confront, but to perform a concert this time without incident. He might have been carving out a path for future musicians, perhaps as an unconscious intention. Or simply proving that a Black man could perform in the South without incident. But this time is different—because he has Tony for protection, and because Tony's attitude will put a different spin on the trip. Because of all that happened in Act Two, Dr. Shirley behaves differently in Act Three than what he had planned.

By Act Three, both Tony and Dr. Shirley have moved from acceptance to resistance. They now respond actively to the manifestations of racism. It's not okay for Dr. Shirley to be given a supply closet for a dressing room. It's not okay for him to take a food tray to his supply closet rather than eating in the dining room. Even though this means both he and Tony will lose money, they are no longer willing to go along with these rules. They have transformed individually, and make a small dent in society by saying no. There are some small social consequences: those fancy White people do not get the Christmas concert they had been so looking forward to. Too bad! But there are life-changing individual consequences. Tony's eyes are opened and he becomes a more loving person, while Dr. Shirley moves from loneliness and isolation to a long-standing friendship.

How far did the society transform as a result of this journey? Very little, if at all, though Dr. Shirley and Tony confronted racism in ways that Blacks at the time usually did not. They broke a few stereotypes along the way. They showed that Whites don't always get what they want on the backs of Blacks. And probably even the workers in the cotton fields had a stereotype surprisingly broken for them.

But this isn't really a story about social transformation—which is true of many other films about racism in society. Racism is too powerful and systemic to be changed in the course of a movie. Instead, the movie shows that the change in racist attitudes begins with the individual—as it usually does.

Adding the Pressure Cooker

The personal transformations could not happen without these two men spending time together in a close space. They have to be close enough for a long enough time for them to grate on each other, to help each other, to have to stand up for each other and face challenges together.

Many years ago I interviewed Ron Bass, one of the writers of *Rain Man*. He said that those two brothers were in the car three days too long, and that was long enough to force the transformation. Tony and Dr. Shirley were in the car together for eight weeks. It would be almost impossible for transformation not to happen in that amount of time.

Detailing the Theme

Green Book is a terrific example of the nuancing of a theme through each act. Breaking down the screenplay allows us to see exactly how action and dialogue further detail the theme.

I'm going to focus on the screenplay rather than the film. You can compare the screenplay to the film to see how these beats work. You'll also see which beats were cut, either because they seemed unnecessary or because of the need to keep the movie down to size, meaning under two hours.

On p. 4, the owner of the Copacabana, Jules Odell, mentions that Sammy Davis Jr. will be performing when the club reopens in January. Jules tells us that Sammy is a great entertainer but refers to him by a racist term, "moolie," and mentions that "when I first booked him, we didn't even allow coloreds in the joints." A few lines later,

Jules tells us that "the only color I cared about was green." Clearly, if somebody brings in the money, the person booking the entertainer would be okay with having that person perform. Of course, as the story continues, we realize that performing and eating in an establishment were two different things.

On p. 8, Black workmen lay a carpet at Tony's apartment, and Dolores gives them each a glass of lemonade. In the screenplay, Tony demonstrates his racist attitude by throwing the two glasses into the garbage after the Black men have drunk out of them.

On p. 14, the racial theme is slightly touched on when an Asian man leaves the interview with Dr. Shirley, and then Tony meets Dr. Shirley's valet, who is from India.

By p. 15, at the completion of the Set-Up, the racial theme is clearly expressed when Tony sees Dr. Shirley, who is rich, educated, and Black.

During Act One Development, on p. 18, we see how Tony stands up for himself by refusing to launder Dr. Shirley's clothes or shine his shoes. This is echoed in Act Three when Dr. Shirley is mistaken for a valet and is asked to carry a White woman's luggage. The stereotypes are there, but Dr. Shirley stands his ground, as Tony did in Act One. The answer is "no!"

On p. 19, we see Tony's attitude about Chinese people: "If you want me, it's gotta be a buck and a quarter [$125] a week or go hire the little chink that just pranced out of here."

On p. 22, Tony further reveals his racist attitude when he describes Dr. Shirley to Dolores: "he was dressed up like some crazy African jungle bunny." Of course, Tony doesn't get that Dr. Shirley was really dressed like a prince—and that he certainly is a prince in his own field.

On p. 32, Tony makes another racist comment, this time about Germans: "Krauts are all sneaks." But we see the identity theme being played with because the man is not German at all, but Russian. Tony is wrong again. He doesn't have it figured out correctly—even though he thinks he does.

We see a further demonstration of Tony's racist mindset on p. 33, when he leaves the car then quickly goes back to snatch his wallet off the dash. Clearly a Black man can't be trusted, even if he is as classy as Dr. Shirley.

One of the first story beats showing a change of attitude in Tony comes on p. 36, when he observes Dr. Shirley sitting by himself, drinking his Cutty Sark—which he consumes by the bottle every night. Tony ponders this, and recognizes his loneliness. He's starting to see Dr. Shirley as a fellow human being.

On p. 38, Tony realizes that he's the only White guy among the Black chauffeurs, and on p. 39, for the first time, Tony realizes how extraordinary Dr. Shirley is. The script tells us (p. 40) that he "realizes he's not driving just a piano player, he's driving a genius." Tony is further impressed when he realizes that Dr. Shirley played at the White House and met the president. He starts standing up for Dr. Shirley. It's his job, but we sense that there is real emotion behind it. Tony is supposed to make sure there is always a Steinway grand piano for Dr. Shirley—a job he could do whether or not he respects his boss—but when Tony confronts the stage manager because the Steinway is not there (p. 48), he's clearly angry. It's starting to become personal.

Much of Act Two shows Dr. Shirley and Tony trying to figure each other out. On p. 53, Tony puts a stereotype on Dr. Shirley: he's supposed to love fried chicken, and Dr. Shirley replies, "You have a very narrow assessment of me." This is immediately followed by Dr. Shirley's enjoyment of the fried chicken, and the sense that he has had a rather narrow assessment of himself.

At the Midpoint (p. 56), they enter Louisville, the first place where they need to follow the Green Book, which contains a list of where Blacks are allowed to stay in the South. Just as Tony has come to understand how special this man is, the South affirms that he is "garbage." He has to stay at a ramshackle hotel, watching families play together and barefoot Black children run around. This is not his world. He goes to a bar—wanting, even hoping, to do in the South what he can do in the North— but he gets beaten up, and Tony has to get him out of there safely.

On p. 64, Dr. Shirley is on the receiving end of another racist stereotype, this time because the emcee has figured out what people like Dr. Shirley like to eat: fried chicken,

collard greens, and grits. Tony is capable of understanding the many complexities of human behavior, and his understanding and sensitivity come to the forefront: "Don't sweat it, Doc. I been working in nightclubs in the city my whole life . . . I know it's a complicated world." The directions in the script tell us that Dr. Shirley realizes "he under-estimated Lipp" (p. 80).

By the Second Turning Point of the relationship story (p. 80), they have come together, understood each other, and they are nursing a scotch together in the hotel lobby. Dr. Shirley opens up about his difficult family life. And Tony hears the story of how Dr. Shirley was talked into playing popular music rather than the classical music he loves because "audiences would never accept a black pianist on the classical stage." He clarifies that the record company "wanted to turn me into just another colored entertainer. You know, the guy who smokes . . . and puts a glass of whiskey on the piano" (p. 81). Tony questions whether that was the correct decision for Dr. Shirley to make. He continues to give Dr. Shirley advice which will pay off in Act Three: "You should have stood up for yourself." And he affirms Dr. Shirley's genius: "What are you? . . . Anyone can sound like Beethoven and those other guys you said . . . But your music, what you do, only you can do, and nobody can train for that. And tell you the truth, I like your shit better" (p. 82).

Throughout the second half of Act Two, Tony has been developing a clear view of the situation: Whites make the rules, and Tony believes in resisting these rules. On p. 67, he says, "if they tried to pull that outhouse shit with me, I'd piss right in their living room." Toward the end of Act Two, Tony stands up for Dr. Shirley when the cops ask him to get out of the car in the rain. But he also stands up for himself when the cop shows his racist attitude toward Italians: "Now I get it. That's why you driving this boy around . . . You half a nigger yourself." No way is Tony going to take that. He punches the guy out and both he and Dr. Shirley end up in jail.

There are two different views about what actions best resist racism: do what Tony did, or follow Dr. Shirley's advice when he says, "You don't win with violence, Tony, you win when you maintain your dignity. And tonight, because of you, we didn't maintain ours" (p. 90).

Expectations are turned around again because it's Bobby Kennedy who saves them. Dr. Shirley is ashamed and embarrassed. He knew they were considered "garbage" by the cops. Now he presumes he's considered garbage by the Kennedys, because they've had to get him out of jail. He's spent his whole life doing everything to escape this demeaning stereotype and yet, once more, it has defined him.

In spite of this incident, Tony explains, "I know who I am." But Dr. Shirley doesn't know who he is, or where he belongs. He's not White enough or Black enough, and he asks, "What am I?!" (p. 94).

At the Second Turning Point of the main narrative, when they arrive in Birmingham (which is Meridian, Alabama, in the screenplay, p. 100), the question of identity comes to the forefront. They walk through the kitchen, where all the workers are Black, to Dr. Shirley's dressing room—which is a supply closet. On the surface, everyone seems warm and welcoming, but that is not the truth of the situation. Yuri, the cellist in the trio, tells Tony the story of Dr. Shirley and Nat King Cole performing in Birmingham. He explains that Nat King Cole was the first Black man to play at a White establishment, and that they were beaten up. "That's why this tour was so important to him . . . There is no genius without courage" (p. 100).

In many films, one line of dialogue states the theme; the story is being told to express this theme. In *Green Book*, this is the line. It tells us specifically what the story is about and why we should admire Dr. Shirley: his genius is combined with his courage.

In the roll at the end we are told: "Tony Lipp and Dr. Shirley would remain lifelong friends until their deaths within months of each other in 2013."

Study Questions

1. Trace the racism theme through other films, to see how it's worked out on both the social level and the personal level. You can read about how this theme works in *The Defiant Ones* in my book (co-authored with John Winston Rainey) *You Talkin to Me?: How to Write Great Dialogue*.

2. Read some biographical information about Dr. Don Shirley and Tony Lipp. How closely did the film follow their journey?

3. You might want to order the screenplay through Script City in Los Angeles and mark every story beat that adds to the theme. I have pointed out the major beats, but there are many more.

4. Watch one of your favorite films and pay specific attention to how the theme helps develop the character. The theme might be about corruption or greed or love or the triumph of the underdog. If it's a great screenplay, you will find at least 20 story beats, if not more.

5. Take one of your favorite films and trace the transformational arc. How many story beats does it take for the main character to be transformed? You might find it helpful to review my analyses of *Tootsie* and of *As Good As It Gets* in my book *Advanced Screenwriting*. Each of those movies has more than 30 beats that demonstrate the stages of the transformation.

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