

This Dry and Desert Land: What We Can Learn About Earth From Lucas' Tatooine

The lights dim. The sound of a projector screen flicking on behind the audience draws all eyes to the screen at the front of the room. After some commercials and a few plugs from the concession stand outside, a small message appears on the screen that reads “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...”, followed by loud music and the eventual, screen-filling text crawl of *Star Wars*. In 1977, theatergoers saw Lucas's masterpiece for the first time, and the whole world was enthralled with his gripping scriptwriting, diverse and colorful planets, unique and breathtakingly realistic aliens, and believable, interesting characters. While all that is wonderful, perhaps there is an underlying element that the audience was not aware of—something that made Lucas' galaxy far, far away seem much closer to home than it actually was.

Elements of familiarity can be found throughout the *Star Wars* saga in a variety of ways, places and forms. Themes, references and signs of normal Earth permeate *Star Wars* in subtle ways that draw the audience in and make them feel at home, while still taking place in an alien universe. One extreme example of familiarity in the unfamiliar is the planet Tatooine, famous in *Star Wars* lore as being home-world of Anakin and Luke Skywalker. Tatooine is a desert world, covered completely in sand, and has no natural oceans or forests on its surface. Despite the seemingly irreconcilable differences between Tatooine and life as we know it on earth, similarities abound. These connections can be seen through the study of religious allusion, real-world ethical issues like slavery, gambling, drinking and survival of the fittest, and the human pursuit of a higher quality of life.

Hokey Religions and Ancient Weapons: Faith, Religion and “The Force” in *Star Wars*

For all its achievement in the world of cinema, *Star Wars* has been the target of religious questioning since its inception. Within the lore of the films, a mystical, invisible entity known

simply as “The Force,” exists, and this “Force” acts as a moderator of time and space. It controls the destiny of all living things and can be channeled to the will of beings attuned to it (*A New Hope*). Jimmy Akin writes, “According to Lucas, the Jedi exhortation to ‘Use the Force’ essentially means ‘Make a leap of faith’ (or ‘Trust God’). The phrase ‘May the Force be with you,’ of course, is clearly evocative of ‘May God be with you.’ The connection between God and the Force (or its light side),” he continues, “was strengthened in *Episode I* with the introduction of the concepts of ‘the *living* Force’ and even ‘*the will of the Force*’” (1). Finally, Akin observes how this has stirred a great deal of controversy among atheists and religion-wary parents (1).

Lucas has been asked multiple times if “The Force” was based on a particular faith, as it parallels many themes of real-world religions. In the article “The God of Star Wars,” one interview with Lucas is quoted: “I didn't want to invent a religion. I wanted to try to explain in a different way the religions that have already existed...I put the Force into the movie in order to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people--more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system” (Byfield and Byfield, 34). Lucas’ intention was, indeed, to portray a certain religious awareness in *Star Wars*, as many have noted, but not to point to a specific religion or faith.

By looking to the planet Tatooine, we find a number of religious parallels through Lucas’s symbolism and clever writing. Ted and Virginia Byfield note the particular example of Obi-Wan Kenobi as “the Franciscan-looking warrior monk” (34). In the film, Kenobi acts as an enlightened teacher, who provides Luke Skywalker with knowledge of “The Force,” much like a religious teacher. Learning the ways of “The Force,” Kenobi says, is Luke’s destiny, which it guides regardless (*A New Hope*). In this way, “The Force” is comparable to some aspects of the

Christian God, both of whom are omnipotent and omniscient. Kenobi also says, however, that it is like “an energy field, created by all living things” (*A New Hope*). In this sense, “The Force” is more like a life-force that binds all life together, and less like an entity of its own, similar to the Buddhist belief of shared existence. In the fourth movie, Tatooine introduces “The Force” to the viewers to inspire a reawakening of religious ideas, just as Lucas intended. He does not aim to convert anyone, or to convince atheists they are wrong; he simply wants to convey the notion that humans have a higher calling, and that they should be both aware and open to the idea.

We Don’t Serve Your Kind Here: Ethnical and Ethical Issues

Although religious elements permeate the movies, some of the best arguments for parents not to let their kids watch *Star Wars* are started on the basics of ethics. Violence, racism, slavery, gambling and injustice are pervading themes in the saga, all of which are problems on the planet Tatooine. But Lucas did not intend to teach kids that violence and slavery were right or acceptable; his stories were produced to expose audiences to the existence of ongoing problems in our world. By demonstrating the horrors such vices can produce, he meets this end.

Slavery, for example, can be clearly seen throughout *The Phantom Menace*, the first movie in the saga. Anakin Skywalker, the eventual father of Luke, is a nine year old boy enslaved to Watto, an unfriendly merchant on Tatooine. Slavery is rampant on Tatooine, and humans and aliens are treated as property to be bought and sold. Padme Amidala, the queen of the planet Naboo, asks young Anakin if he is a slave, to which he replies “I’m a person, and my name is Anakin” (*The Phantom Menace*). This heartbreaking scene gives insight to Lucas’ true intention of exposing slavery as criminal and unjust, rather than upholding it as an institution.

In addition to buying and selling, however, slaves were also used as objects to be gambled. Gamblers could wager a slave, a being with real feelings and no rights, and the only release was by death or, if luck would have it, to be freed by a current owner. Anakin Skywalker earned his freedom when Qui-Gon Jinn won a bet with Anakin's owner, Watto, of which Anakin was the wager (*The Phantom Menace*). In this example, gambling and slavery are used together to represent the evils of undermining the value of human life, and to raise awareness of a real-world issue. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "In 2005, the Department of Justice reported there have been an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 sex slaves in the U.S. since 2001" (International Crisis Aid, 1), and this issue persists today. *Star Wars* brings awareness to these modern issues by mirroring them in life on Tatooine.

Other issues that Lucas wanted to address include racism and discrimination. In a scene on Tatooine, Luke, Kenobi and the two droids R2-D2 and C-3PO walk into a bar. The bartender immediately calls out the two droids and tells them to wait outside, saying, "We don't serve your kind here" (*A New Hope*). In today's world, we see a similar type of prejudice occurring. For example, homosexuals or supporters of the opposite political party are often met with scrutiny and criticism. Despite great strides in modern society to preach acceptance and tolerance, lingering prejudices prevent a total redefinition of social interaction. Lucas incorporates these ideas into his works to bring them to the attention of his viewers; discrimination is still alive and is still as much a problem in our world as it is on Tatooine. While slavery and discrimination are important, violence is a much broader and unavoidable topic in *Star Wars*. What Lucas may have done, according to scholar John McDowell is make us believe "that violence takes several forms in these movies, and these range from something akin to a 'holy violence,' through a sense of 'just war,' to an ethical philosophy approaching a fullblown redemptive 'non-violence'"

(McDowell, 4). In other words Lucas uses violence but justifies it as a means to achieve peace.

A clear example of justified violence appears in the cantina scene on Tatooine, where a disgruntled patron threatens young Skywalker's life. Kenobi intervenes by severing the patron's arm with his light saber (*A New Hope*). Defending yourself to preserve your life, Lucas seems to say, is justified, even if it leads to violence. Though the answer to this question is largely based on the worldview of the viewers, Lucas appears to argue that violence can be justified through self-defense or the preservation of good.

Despite the contentions people have with Lucas's films, certain negative themes can actually have a positive impact. Exposing slavery, discrimination, gambling and slave trafficking as real world problems helps raise awareness to the causes established to oppose them and helps create a more unified fight against these real threats. While justified violence is more of an ethical and moral argument than a true issue, it is still addressed in the films for the audience to think over.

Jabba, You're A Wonderful Human Being: Parallels to the Human Condition

Not only does the *Star Wars* saga provide audiences with insights into ethical issues that we experience on earth, but it also provides parallels to the human condition. If the characters of *Star Wars* were epic heroes with no flaws, the movie would not be worth watching, but Lucas' cast of memorable characters share a larger humanity and a struggle to live in their world, much like all human beings on Earth do. Humans struggle to gather resources, work for a living, and cope with the evil around them. In *Star Wars*, Tatooine's sentients are no different than Earth's humans in that regard.

The search for clean water is one parallel that many citizens of earth share with the inhabitants of Tatooine. While many Americans do not have to worry about this issue, certain

people and people groups—even in North American—do not have access to a constant supply of clean water. In Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, drinkable water does not magically appear in bathroom faucets like it does in the United States. Desert environments exist due to the absence of surface water, and Tatooine is one planet-wide desert. Similar to the Arabic nations in the Middle East, Tatooine settlers and farmer must search and dig for clean water. Where humans on Earth would dig wells for underground springs, moisture vaporators on Tatooine absorb excess humidity from the air that would condense into pure water.

The balance of good and evil is also a relevant idea to the human race. What is acceptable and upright has been the subject of debate since the beginning of civilization. When someone is wronged or an injustice is delivered, however, it is the natural human reaction to seek justice and retribution. “Part of the reason for the stunning success of the 1977 film,” says Bruce David Forbes “was that it re-introduced the ‘feel good’ movie to the American public with a straightforward tale of good versus evil, and a dramatic victory for the good” (360). We love to see good triumph over evil; that is how humans are wired by default.

But sometimes, on earth and on Tatooine, evil is not quite so black and white, so clear cut. *The Phantom Menace* gives an example of such a controversial evil in the form of Anakin Skywalker. Forbes writes, “The awareness of a mixture of good and evil in the same person has been heightened in the latest movie installment, Phantom Menace, which features an adorable little boy, Anakin Skywalker. Although he is the hero of the film, everyone who knows the developing mythos is aware that this same child will grow up to be-come Darth Vader” (362). It is hard to accept that evil can grow from good, and we as humans struggle to sympathize with a hero who we know will end up a villain.

Although it has already been touched on, religion and faith is something that merits a closer look, because it causes a rift between humans. As a people, humans have a longing for a purpose, a higher calling to which they can attain. For Christians, it is to serve God and others. To Buddhists, achieving Nirvana is the highest act of existence. For the Atheists, it is to live life to the fullest and sate their personal desires. But no one belief system perfectly aligns with others. This can lead to dissension and to exclusion, and sometimes to violence when these religions conflict with one another. The Jedi are guardians of peace and justice in the *Star Wars* mythos, and to counter them are the Sith, who seek only to rule and dominate through power. Both wield the same Force, but for different goals. Coming to a middle ground has eluded both the Jedi and the Sith since their inceptions, much like how world religions on Earth cannot coexist peacefully in their current states. Lucas plays to this in his films, and while he never claims to offer an answer, his thesis certainly raises awareness of this issue.

A Galaxy Far, Far Away: Concluding Thoughts

Lucas delivers an impactful, well-written story with brilliant characters and an intense, focused plot, but he also imbues his story with a thesis. He wants every man, woman and child to know that just because Luke Skywalker lives on Tatooine, fights an Empire, and saves a princess, does not mean his problems are any less real than ours here on Earth. Gambling exists. Slavery exists. Prejudice and discrimination exists. Despite what humans have accomplished over the centuries, certain problems have become timeless, and without reminders, we might grow complacent toward them. Lucas urges the human race to reconsider what we have grown too accustomed to, to reevaluate some of the problems we still face, to harken to a dry, desert world in a galaxy far, far away where such problems still exist as well, and to think for maybe just a moment that these issues are worth a second look. Raising awareness of real issues can

only lead to improvement in life, for all humans, everywhere, from California to Washington, from Russia to Brazil, and from Earth to Tatooine.

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