

“The Tree of Life” starring Brad Pitt, Sean Penn, Jessica Chastain, 2011, PG-13, 139 minutes

Major themes:

- Love
- Loss
- Bullying
- Grief
- Memories
- Grace vs. nature
- Nurture
- Wonder
- Authority

Major characters:

- Mr. & Mrs. O’Brien
- Jack
- R.L
- Steve

Movie Nights for Thinkers and Seekers

Background info:

- This film is set in Waco, Texas in 1956 and is ranked at #79 on BBC Magazine's "*The 100 greatest American films.*"
- After some moviegoers walked out demanding refunds in opening weeks, some American theaters set up signs warning moviegoers about the enigmatic and non-linear narrative of the movie.
- The director and cinematographer laid down a series of parameters to be used throughout the film, including: shoot in available natural light, seek maximum resolution and fine grain, compose in depth, avoid lens flares, no filters, no zooming, etc.
- An Italian cinema showed the film for a week with the first two reels switched. Even though the film starts with production logos, no one in the theater noticed and thought it was all part of director Malick's "*crazy editing style.*"
- The scene with the bats flying in the evening skies was not computer-generated animation, but was shot in Austin, Texas among the largest urban bat colony in North America. Eating roughly 20,000 - 30,000 pounds of insects on each night flight, nearly 1.5 million bats in Austin call the South Congress Bridge home.
- A massive live oak estimated to be about 100 years old was dug up and transported 8 miles to the town of Smithville, Texas, where it was replanted for pivotal scenes in this film. It's estimated that the tree and root ball weighed in at more than 65,000 pounds.
- Catholic author and auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles, Father Robert Barron, reviewing this film for a Chicago Tribune blog, noted that "*in the play of good and evil, in the tension between nature and grace, God is up to something beautiful, though we are unable to grasp it totally . . . 'Tree of Life' is communicating this same difficult but vital lesson.*"

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Scriptures:

Job 38:4 – 7 (ESV) – *“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”*

1 Kings 19:11 – 12 (NIV) – *“The Lord said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.”*

Job 26:7 – 14 (NLT) – *“God stretches the northern sky over empty space and hangs the earth on nothing. He wraps the rain in his thick clouds, and the clouds don’t burst with the weight. He covers the face of the moon, shrouding it with his clouds. He created the horizon when he separated the waters; he set the boundary between day and night. The foundations of heaven tremble; they shudder at his rebuke. By his power the sea grew calm. By his skill he crushed the great sea monster. His Spirit made the heavens beautiful, and his power pierced the gliding serpent. These are just the beginning of all that he does, merely a whisper of his power. Who, then, can comprehend the thunder of his power?”*

Isaiah 29:13 – 14 (ESV) – *“Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”*

Psalms 46:10 (NASB) – *“Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”*

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Discussion points:

1. In what ways does this film show us that it is nature, not God, that demands subjugation, and that it is God, not nature, who inspires grace?
2. Give an example of a current news story in which you can clearly see both the way of nature and the way of grace simultaneously. What makes it difficult for us to see those two choices in the ordinariness of daily life?
3. Jack realized that someone was always calling him, although he may not have realized that the someone was God. What caused Jack to pay more attention? What hindered him?
4. Where in this film do you see submission? forgiveness? sacrifice? grace?
5. Discuss the narrator's words from the beginning of the film: *"The nuns taught us there are two ways through life – the way of nature and the way of grace. We have to choose which one we'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. It accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself, get others to please it, too. It likes to lord it over them, to have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it and love is smiling through all things. They taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end. I will be true to you, whatever comes."*
6. What do you think is the significance of Jack O'Brien's initials?