



Film Study Guide

Movie #4 Something the Lord Made



Something the Lord Made is a 2004 American **made**-for-television biographical drama film about the black cardiac pioneer Vivien Thomas (1910–1985) and his complex and volatile partnership with white surgeon Alfred Blalock (1899–1964), the "Blue Baby doctor" who pioneered modern heart surgery. Although Vivien Thomas (Mos Def), a black man in the 1930s, is originally hired as a janitor, he proves himself adept at assisting the "Blue Baby doctor," Alfred Blalock (Alan Rickman), with his medical research. When Blalock insists that Thomas follow him to Johns Hopkins University, they must find a way to skirt a racist system to continue their study of infant heart disease. Thomas is indispensable to Blalock's progress, but Blalock is the only one who is allowed to receive the acclaim. The movie can be viewed on You Tube (1:51:49)

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1. The movie starts during the 1930s in Nashville, Tennessee. Slavery has been abolished and Reconstruction has ended. What evidence do we see that Jim Crow laws are still in place? Jim Crow laws/etiquette were put in place during Reconstruction and intensified after Reconstruction ended so that Blacks must demonstrate their inferiority to whites by actions, words, and manners. **Do you think that Jim Crow etiquette is still expected today? If so, what is expected, when and/or where? If not, explain when and why you think Jim Crow laws were finally abolished.**
2. Alfred Blalock moved to Baltimore, Maryland to work at Johns Hopkins Hospital. He invited Vivien Thomas to go with him and Vivien agreed. When Alfred Blalock and Vivien Thomas walked into the building together, they were stopped, and Vivien was told that he had to use the "workers" entrance. Blalock works as a doctor for John Hopkins. Thomas was hired to work as Blalock's lab assistant. **So, who uses the "workers entrance"?** Once Thomas entered the building and was walking to the laboratory, **describe how people looked at him and explain what they may have been**

thinking? When Blalock and Thomas met up in the lab, Blalock did not say anything about the incident. **Was that the appropriate response? What are your thoughts and the reason for your thoughts?**

3. After Thomas found out that he was being paid the salary of a maintenance worker he had a conversation with Blalock. Blalock said, "Who cares what they call you? You and I know how valuable the work is that you do. Thomas said, "If my work is so important, why am I being paid two grades below my job classification." Blalock said, "I don't pay attention to bureaucratic details..." When Blalock discussed the matter with his colleague Walter, the colleague questioned, "Should he circumvent administrative regulations for a colored person?" Blalock's response was, "I am close to something and I need him..." **Do you think Blalock was sincerely concerned about Thomas or is Blalock more focused on his career? Explain your answer.**

4. In 1944, the day before the operation on the first blue baby, Thomas successfully performed the procedure on a dog. When it was time for the blue baby's operation, **were you surprised to see Blalock performing the surgery without Thomas? Did you think Thomas was going to be assisting?** Just before starting the procedure, Blalock demanded to have Thomas guide him during the operation. After the procedure, Blalock told Thomas that he did well. Then when the photographer asks for a photo of all the doctors who participated in the operation no one acknowledged Thomas or told him to join in the photo. **Is this white privilege, an oversight or both? How would you feel if you were Thomas, especially knowing that that Blalock could not do the procedure without you? Has your response to question number three changed or does it remain the same?**

5. After Blalock's reception at Belvedere Hotel, Thomas confronts Blalock. During his speech, Blalock said, "We made history together. We changed the world." Thomas said that he is invisible to the world, but he thought that things were different in the lab.
 - a. **What did Thomas mean about things being different in the lab?**
 - b. **Do you think Blalock would have changed if Thomas stayed?**
 - c. **What happens when African Americans are expected to comply and wait for their opportunity. In 1868, the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted citizenship and equal civil and legal rights to African Americans and slaves who had been emancipated after the American Civil War. This real-life event with Blalock and Thomas occurred in the 1940s and African Americans were still expected to wait. What can we do to help change the way people think in 2021 to get equal access to education and economic opportunities for African Americans? Also, is there some way to make up for the past?**

6. Thomas deferred his dream of becoming a doctor and settled for being a lab assistant. A deferred dream makes us lifeless like a raisin in the sun. When Thomas finally decides to pursue his dream and enrolls in college, he faces several challenges. **Have you ever deferred a dream? What was the outcome? Did you go back and make your dream happen? Now think about the racial inequities African Americans face in school and at**

work. What is happening to their dreams? What can we do at our workplaces, churches, and schools to support equal opportunities for all, especially African Americans?

7. When Blalock was having his last conversation with Thomas, Blalock said that he had regrets. **What do you think Blalock regretted? Is there an incident where an injustice occurred to an African American and you stayed silent? What happened or what do you think happened to that African American? What can you do moving forward?**

8. How do we challenge people to honestly question their thoughts and feelings to determine why they fear equality (equal access and opportunities) for African Americans? **Brainstorm questions we can ask ourselves, our friends, or our family to think about in response to their racist comments or actions, as alternatives to silence?**

Resolve Challenge for January/February

Why do you think some white people despise or fear African Americans? How are despise and fear related?

- Choose at least one person with whom to discuss some of the details of Reconstruction.
- Let them know that the discussion may be uncomfortable, but it will be a valuable learning experience.
- After discussing Reconstruction ask the person, “Why do you think some white people despise or fear African Americans?”

This conversation will prepare you for our next movie discussion. We look forward to hearing about your conversations on February 25, 2021.