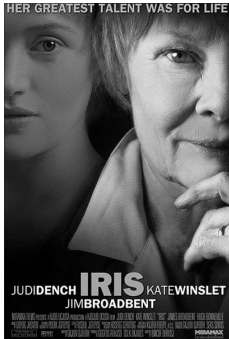


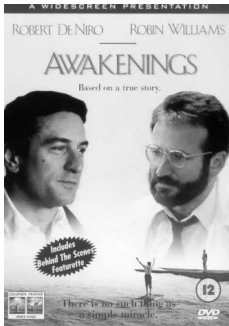
## *Iris* and *Awakenings*: Timeless Tear-Jerkers

### Mohammed Ejaz Ali\*

Department of Biology  
Lake Forest College  
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045



*Iris* (2001 film) Directed By Richard Eyre



*Awakenings* (1990 film) Directed By Penny Marshall

To sum up my classmates' reactions to *Iris* and *Awakenings*: that was so cool. However, these movies provide more than just sheer visual pleasure. They supply food for thought. Provocative in several arenas, *Iris* and *Awakenings* are like potent cannonballs that shake you to your core. Moreover, the acting is simply impeccable. In fact, several actors were nominated and given Academy Awards for their heart-rending performances. *Iris* and *Awakenings* are two of those rare films that effectively balance comedy and drama. Truly, as films, they are simply successful.

*Iris* vividly narrates the tale of the enduring love between noted British philosopher and author Iris Murdoch (Kate Winslet and Judi Dench) and college professor John Bayley (Jim Broadbent), love that surpasses even the hurdles created by Alzheimer's. *Awakenings* portrays the miraculous return of Leonard Lowe (Robert De Niro) from a state of paralysis brought about by the neurodegenerative encephalitis. Despite their differences, these movies are remarkably similar and parallel.

*Iris* and *Awakenings* both advocate that one should seize the day (*carpe diem*) while it lasts. This is explicitly conveyed by the frequent introduction of the concept of time. These movies highlight the point that one should not let one's future plans or past rule him or her, but instead should always live in the present. As Alzheimer's progresses, Iris Murdoch forgets her past and

her plan for the future. Bygone events, such as the death of her girlfriend, don't weigh her down. Instead, Iris, with an untarnished outlook towards life, spends every moment fulfilling one impulse after another. She has not only been unchained from the shackles that memory creates, she has been liberated from the pressures of working towards a goal. This is evident in the scene when Iris lifts the rocks she had placed on her papers, which contained the rough beginning to her novel, and lets them blow away. Activities aimed at achieving future gain forestall us from living in the present. Planners, time tables, and calendars rob us of flexibility of time that could be spent in enjoyment. Life is simply too short to waste.

*Iris* and *Awakenings* playfully tackle the concept of age-appropriate behavior and suggest that life is too short to stick to formulated rules of what suits somebody at what age. Like inquisitive children, Iris repeatedly questions John Bayley to the point of frustration and Leonard, at the age of forty, also bombards Dr. Malcolm Sayer (Robin Williams) with simple questions. Leonard realizes that he has been given a second chance and he takes full advantage of it without worrying if his actions correspond with his age or not. At one point, even Iris is shown watching the *Teletubbies*. These scenes challenge the old notion of age-appropriate behavior and suggest that age need not restrict one to a set pattern of behavior. For example, Leonard is attracted to a girl considerably younger than him, while Iris dates men way over her age. In *Awakenings*, other patients, who also reawaken due to L-Dopa, challenge the concept of age-appropriate behavior as well. An old woman, after looking at herself in the mirror, cries out for hair dye. These scenes tie perception to age and suggest that you are, after all, as young as you feel. Indeed, life is too short to follow society's rules of what is appropriate at what age.

Along with the importance of time, *Iris* and *Awakenings* emphasize the significance of love, friendship and family. Dr. Malcolm Sayer, initially in the movie *Awakenings*, is a lonely guy with little to no social skills. He is engrossed in science to a level that leaves no room for company. For example, Dr. Sayer refuses Julie's dinner invitation because he has to attend to an experiment that he is conducting on plants. However, after he gets to know Leonard, he comes to the conclusion:

*That the human spirit is more powerful than any drug - and THAT is what needs to be nourished: with work, play, friendship, family. THESE are the things that matter. This is what we've forgotten - the simplest things. ("Memorable" 2)*

This socially inept and shy doctor, even though hesitantly, asks Julie out. *Iris* too, subtly advocates that love is the language that ought to be spoken by all.

However, unlike *Awakenings*, *Iris* suggests that the physical aspect of life is just as important. We need to find a balance between lust and love. When Iris and John are kissing each other's hand, John says that as a married couple, they could be doing this all the time. Iris corrects him and says that perhaps not all but nearly all the time. The theme of balance is introduced.

Throughout the film, Iris is in touch with her inner animal while John Bayley is simply a product of society. Iris has unshaved armpits and wrinkled skin. Yet she does not resort to cosmetics because she is comfortable within her own body. She is open to lesbianism and promiscuity – attitudes that show her instinctual nature. However, John Bayley is a figure of formality. Together these

\* This paper was written for FIYS 106 Medical Mysteries: Neuroscience in Chicago, taught by Dr. Shubhik K. DebBurman.

contrasting characters emphasize the importance of establishing balance.

At one point in the movie, a cat is shown hissing at a fox and to Iris's utter disappointment, the fox leaves. This scene also symbolically points out the conflict between formality and informality. Cats are tamed creatures while foxes are simply pure beasts. Metaphorically it basically suggests that society unjustly dominates us. Even in the subtle scene when John is reading a passage to Iris from *Pride and Prejudice*, this conflict is highlighted because the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen is a Victorian classic that exposes the sexual repression ensued by the prevalent, overbearing, straitlaced, societal etiquettes and deals with the conception of a balance between love and lust. It prompts the audience to imitate the fashion in which the characters in the book challenge, cross, and abide various dictatorial societal customs and establish a baseline for themselves. The nudity in the movie also renders the point that while taking into considerations the pressures created by the puritanical society, one must not stifle his or her wild, untamed, corporeal, earthly instincts. *Iris* makes one reevaluate his or her priorities and ultimately settle the conflict between society and individuality.

Thematically powerful, *Iris* and *Awakenings* stir one at various levels. They educate the social consequences of having a member of one's family suffer a fatal neurodegenerative disease. Although the biological aspect of the diseases – Alzheimer's and encephalitis – are not stressed enough, *Iris* and *Awakenings* do a fair job of highlighting the neurological and behavioral changes that accompany the diseases. Moreover, the insufficiency of biological substance is substituted by the presence of ample social consequences of the diseases. *Iris* runs at a much slower pace than *Awakenings* and the presence of elements such as homosexuality, nudity, and promiscuity make it all the more controversial while *Awakenings* is a simple, tender, love story with emotional ups and downs. Hence, I would recommend *Awakenings* to all but cautiously recommend *Iris* to all above the age of seventeen.

*Note: Eukaryon is published by students at Lake Forest College, who are solely responsible for its content. The views expressed in Eukaryon do not necessarily reflect those of the College. Articles published within Eukaryon should not be cited in bibliographies. Material contained herein should be treated as personal communication and should be cited as such only with the consent of the author.*

## References

Memorable Quotes from *Awakenings*. 2 Oct. 2006.  
<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099077/quotes>>