

Sidney Poitier (1927-2022) – an Icon of (Afro) American Cinema

<p>Sidney Poitier was born February 20, 1927 and died January 6, 2022. He was born prematurely and so by chance in Miami, where his parents were on a visit from Bahamas. He was the first black person to win the “best actor” Academy Award, in 1964, for his role in <i>Lilies of the Field</i>. Coincidentally, however, Sidney Poitier’s three greatest films were all made in 1967, being released at a time when the legal situation of Afro-Americans was improving, following the end of legal segregation, greater enfranchisement (after the 1965 Voting Rights Act) and Johnson administration’s War on Poverty.</p> <p>Watch the videos and answer the questions (numbers in parentheses indicate time). In Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, Poitier plays a doctor and the black fiancé of a younger white woman. Her parents are played by Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, who while liberal-minded, are at first shocked that their daughter is engaged to a man of a different race. Though the mother gradually accepts the situation, the father objects because of the likely unhappiness and seemingly insurmountable problems the couple will face in American culture. Poitier is also criticised by his father. In this scene, Poitier confronts his father, stunningly asserting his right to independence and freedom, but also expressing his deep love. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTgahyvBMk4 1) What does Poitier say he owes his father (0:20)? 2) How much older is the father (0:58)? 3) How does Poitier contrast what he and his father think about themselves (1:55)?</p> <p>Race is also the central theme of In the Heat of the Night, a sizzling “whodunit” set in the US South. Poitier has the role of a homicide detective from Philadelphia, who is arrested for killing a prominent local white man, while visiting his mother in Sparta Mississippi. During the story, Poitier progressively gains the respect of the local police chief (played brilliantly by Rod Steiger) as they find the real killer. In this scene, Poitier is brought into Steiger’s office, who first tries to force a confession from him, before finding out that Poiter is a high-paid police officer. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35HI5AQYUwg 4) When did Steiger asked Cort(ney) to get oil for the air conditioner (0:45)? 5) What is Steiger’s reaction when Poitier says his name is “Virgil Tibbs” (1:05)? 6) How much money does Steiger say Poitier got for killing a white man? (3:35)? 7) What does Poitier offer to do about the telephone call to his chief? (5:25) 8) What does Charlie bring to the police station? (6:30) 9) What does Poitier’s chief in Philadelphia tell him to do (7:40)? 10) What does Steiger call Poitier at the end of the video clip, to convince him to help?</p> <p>Having had a minor part in Blackboard Jungle (1955), Poitier starred in the lead role of another inspirational film about teaching – To Sir, With Love. This British production finds him acting the part of a replacement teacher in a tough school in East End London. Though the question of race is understated in the film, it clearly features as he tries to gain the respect of delinquent young white children. A turning point in the film comes when Poitier realises that the children are only a few weeks away from adult life, as most will leave school at 16. In one famous scene he gives up formal teaching and shows his class how to make a salad. In this scene, he informs the class that henceforth they would all talk to each other as adults (the scene is a bit sexist by today’s standards). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh8VBBLNhRQ 11) Poitier tells the students to treat each other as adults and to be ... (0:15). 12) What, according to Poitier, are the two ways to enter a room? 13) At the end of the video, what advice does he give the young men if they want to be more attractive?</p> <p>Poitier was sometimes criticised for his success, and for his position in Hollywood and the film world, in which discrimination exists to this day. But his screen presence, his intensity and his masterful acting remain undisputable.</p>	<p>Academy Award, commonly known as an Oscar. To release a film (or a song): make it available to the public.</p> <p>Liberal in US English means progressive. Engaged: to be committed; in this case to marriage.</p> <p>Stunning: shocking to cause loss of consciousness; striking appearance</p> <p>Sizzle: to be very hot, make a hissing noise, to be exciting Whodunit: bad English for “who did it?”: i.e., a crime story. To force a confession: to get a confession Police station: police office, premises</p> <p>To star in: to be the star in a film or play</p> <p>Understated: deliberately low level, low key</p> <p>Turning point: a moment when things change</p> <p>Masterful: with great mastery, control, ability</p>
<p>ANSWERS 1) He says he owes his father “nothing”. 2) thirty years. 3) Poitier tells his father that he sees himself as a coloured man, whereas Poitier sees himself just as a man. 4) “Last Wednesday”. 5) Steiger smiles and says “I don’t think we’re going to have any trouble”. 6) A couple of hundred dollars. 7) He offers to pay for the call. 8) Photos of the dead man. 9) He tells Poitier to help on the case. 10) Steiger calls him an “expert” and addresses him as “officer”. 11) “we are going to be reasonable to each other”. 12) One is like an adult, a lady, the other is like a brat. 13) He tells them to be clean, with clean clothes, clean shoes, hands, face, teeth, etc.</p>	<p>Brat: a badly-behaved or spoiled child</p>