



AI Vs Alfred Uhry: Who Drives Miss Daisy Better?

Anshuman Mittra

Ph.D. Scholar, P.G. Department of English, Sambalpur University, Sambalpur, Odisha



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Abstract

Alfred Uhry's short play *Driving Miss Daisy* was published in 1987 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama the very next year. In the following year it was adapted into a movie and it won four Academy Awards. Considering that among all the recent developments in Social Science, Arts and Science, it is AI that is raising the most question, this paper tries to evaluate whether it can replace the playwright while having the same impact on the readers. It does this by asking ChatGPT what changes it would make and then evaluating the responses. The intention was to prove that as far as art and literature is concerned, AI cannot replace the thinking and feeling human being.

Keywords: driving miss daisy, AI, AI vs The human author, human emotion in literature, comparative analysis

Among all the recent developments among social science, arts and science the one development that is causing the most upheaval is AI. As far as art and literature are concerned AI can never replace the human creator and interpreter. This paper tries to prove this claim by discussing Alfred Uhry's highly critically acclaimed play *Driving Miss Daisy* and then asking Chat GPT to what changes it would make if it were to rewrite the play. It then analyses the responses in order to reach a conclusion.

The story was inspired by Uhry's grandmother, Lena Fox, who after crashing her car was forced to hire an African-American Chauffeur, Will Coleman, who would go on to drive her for the next twenty-five years after the former is forced to give up driving following an accident.

The play begins with an argument between Miss Daisy and her son Boolie after the former has crashed her new Packard while taking it out of the garage. Boolie wants to hire a coloured chauffeur for her but she is rather violently opposed to the idea. Miss daisy is extremely close fisted and she thinks that a chauffeur would make her look exuberant in front of her friends. She does not want it. Additionally, there is also the matter of race of the chauffeur. She does not admit any of this but it is clear. Miss Daisy blames the car for the accident and Boolie says, "Mamma cars don't behave. They are behaved upon. The fact it you, all by yourself, demolished that Packard" (*Driving Miss Daisy* 2). When Boolie realizes that he cannot reason with his mother, he leaves. He interviews an African-American chauffeur, Hoke Coleburn, and



finalizes him. He warns Hoke about how high strung his mother is. Hoke says he will manage and as the play progresses the reader learns with delight that he more than manages to do so. After Hoke starts working for Miss Daisy, she neither allows him to drive her anywhere nor does she allow him to do any household chores. Hoke, however, is good humoured and persistent and finally on the sixth day, Miss Daisy relents letting him drive her to the store for shopping. During the short drive she is suspicious, rude, and paranoid. Hoke handles her tantrums masterfully. Miss Daisy behaves the same way again when Hoke drives her to the Temple for the first time and stops in front of the entrance to let her out of the car.

Miss Daisy's doubts about Hoke and his intentions are challenged when one day she urgently calls Boolie to her house and when he arrives, she frantically accuses Hoke of having stolen a can of Salmon from her pantry. She says "Oh I knew something was funny. They all take things, you know. So, I counted" (Driving Miss Daisy 17). Just as all this is going on Hoke enters and Boolie tells him that they need to talk. Hoke brings out a replacement can of Salmon. He says he had taken one so he has brought a replacement. Miss Daisy is embarrassed and she futilely tries to maintain her composure.

Another significant event happens when one day Hoke drives her to the cemetery to her husband's grave and Miss Daisy who had been a teacher all her life finds out to her utter amazement and shock that Hoke cannot read. This is a landmark event because from this point on Miss Daisy takes it upon herself to educate Hoke. During Christmas, she gifts Hoke a grade five handwriting book while vehemently and sincerely making it clear that it was not a Christmas gift, and that Jews had no business giving Christmas gifts. Hoke tries very hard to hide emotions but the fact that he was very touched by this gesture is evident.

About a decade later Boolie tells Hoke that he was going to get his mother a new car and also says that they, especially, Hoke, were going to miss the old car. Hoke happily declares that he was not going to miss the car since he had already made a deal with the dealer to buy it. This, Hoke buying of Miss Daisy's

old car when Boolie gets her a new one, is something that happens to at least once more since at a later stage in the play Hoke says that he now owns Miss Daisy's last to last car which was a '63 Cadillac. Miss Daisy is over protective of all her possessions and if it were not for Boolie, she would not spend money to change her car unless she absolutely had to. However, Hoke, the person who is the only one who actually drives all of Miss Daisy's cars, buying them after Miss Daisy gets new ones shows how attached he had become to them. An argument might be made that he couldn't buy new cars so he bought second-hand cars which were under his command since they were new but this would hardly be believable since all of Miss Daisy's cars were expensive and luxurious vehicles and not designed to be cheap or efficient. Interestingly, Hoke tells Boolie to keep his cigarette ash off his upholstery.

While almost the entire play is set in Atlanta, Georgia, there is one exception when Hoke drives Miss Daisy to Mobile to visit her relations. This journey is significant for multiple reasons. For one, it shows that Miss Daisy had grown to trust Hoke enough to allow him to take her out of town alone. During this journey Hoke has to stop in the middle of nowhere, where it was very dark to relieve himself. Miss Daisy panics when she is left alone in the car and calls out for Hoke irritated at first but desperately later. This shows that she had not only grown to trust Hoke but also that she felt safe in his presence. Moreover, the prolonged time spent in the closed confines of the car brought the two closer to each other. It might also be said that Miss Daisy had begun to understand the significance of Hoke, not only as her chauffeur but also as her ever dependable companion. The two never stop bickering till the very end of the play but it is a result of closeness and not of irritation or intolerance. Another instant where Miss Daisy becomes very uneasy when left alone in the car is when after getting into a jam near the Temple. Hoke goes to investigate the cause and takes longer than expected. Hoke returns and informs her that the Temple had been bombed.

It becomes progressively easier to see that the two have become friends. When Miss Daisy is in her eighties and there's been a power outage after a



serious ice-storm, Hoke arrives having driven his car on ice, something he claims to have learnt while driving a milk truck during the Second War. He's come all the way because he knows that Miss Daisy has to have her coffee in the morning and with the power outage she wouldn't have been able to make any. When Boolie calls for the second time to enquire, Miss Daisy tells him that Hoke has come and then says "He's very handy. I am fine. I don't need a thing in the world" (*Driving Miss Daisy* 37). Considering Miss Daisy's nature the very fact that she openly admits this is the clearest evidence that she is not afraid to acknowledge Hoke's position in her life.

This once seemingly staunch Jewish Lady who was so apprehensive about having a coloured chauffeur buys ticket for herself, her son and his wife for a banquet which was to honour Martin Luther King Jr. Boolie refuses to go to this event as he thinks that it would make his business partners unhappy. According to an audience guide by Martin Andrucki available on the Bates College website,

The deep-south setting is important. The ethnic tensions that had often been associated with this region affect the social attitude of the Jewish Werthan Family. Boolie, for example, is so eager to fit in with his Christian colleagues that he decorates his house for Christmas, something his mother finds contemptible. Boolie also refuses to attend a dinner in honour of Martin Luther King because he is fearful of being stereotyped as a Jewish liberal. Daisy, on the other hand, insists on her Jewishness in spite of the overwhelmingly Christian identity of the Southern Community around her. (Andrucki)

Earlier, it was Miss Daisy who would get upset whenever Hoke could be seen by her friends. Now, however, she does not care about what anybody may think if she attends a banquet honouring Martin Luther King Jr. This change in her was undoubtedly brought about because of her closeness with Hoke and this closeness was a result of, among many other things, the prolonged durations spent within the closed confines of an automobile. Hoke does not accompany her while they were on their way to the venue, however, because she invited him to accompany her while they were on their way to the venue and that too

in a very roundabout way. This dignified behaviour of Hoke was one of the things which earned him respect in the eyes of Miss Daisy. Later in the play when Miss Daisy is even older and who now suffers from episodes of incoherent behaviour suddenly asks Hoke during one of those episodes,

Diasy: Hoke, do you still have the old mobile?

Hoke: From when I first come here? Go on, Miz Daisy, that thing been in the junkyard fifteen years or more. I drivin' yo' next-to-las' car now, '63 Cadillac, running' fine as wine. (Uhry 47)

The sudden question about an old car makes it clear that it wasn't only Hoke who had become fond of cars he was driving and maintaining. This is most likely the reason when she got her second car after Hoke's arrival in her life and Hoke bought the first one, she wanted to be driven around in the old car every once in a while. It had nothing to do with familiarity since she would only be a passenger in the car, but it had everything to do with its role in beginning and fostering their friendship.

At the end of the play when Hoke is eighty-five and Miss Daisy has been in a retirement home since the last two years, he still visits her. Since he does not drive anymore, he has to take a taxi cab there. The play end with Hoke feeding Miss Daisy her Thanksgiving pie.

To sum up then, Uhry has managed to not only tell an extremely warm story of friendship but also has managed to capture the significant episodes of American socio-political as well as cultural history. Considering the importance that he has given the automobile in the title of his play, it's setting and also in the movie of which he himself wrote the screenplay, the significance of the automobile trope cannot be undermined in the work. Now, in order to ascertain whether or not artificial intelligence can come up with a version of a story that is as warm, as accurate and as minute in its details or not, a series of questions were asked to ChatGPT and the conclusion is based on its responses.

When asked what changes it would make if it were to rewrite the play it suggested telling the story from the Hoke's perspective in order to bring forth the life of an African-American man in a racially



segregated America, a stronger emphasis on the civil rights issues, reframing the automobile trope by adding a scene of the car breaking down during a tense moment so that the master and the driver get into their friendship, the introduction of a young character with radical views about civil rights, and a different ending in which Hoke visits Miss Daisy's grave. Again, when it was asked what additional changes it would make? it responded with adding internal monologues but with the warning that AI might over explain but the human playwright would know where to hold back. It also suggested reversing the roles of power, including Hoke's family, moving the setting making Boolie more central and allowing Miss Daisy to drive again to show her denial of ageing and adding flashbacks. Each response, however, warned of possible shortcomings. The warnings were making it too didactic, shifting the focus from the central dynamic, diluting the specific context, diverting from the two-character core, being implausible and disrupting the simplicity of the play respectively.

The shortcomings that were mentioned after the second prompt did not appear after the first prompt. All changes it said it would make after the first prompt would completely change the effect this simple play has. Telling the story from Hoke's perspective would make the story seem one-sided. A stronger emphasis on the civil rights movement would add a political tone to the play which would change the dynamic of the play. The automobile break-down and the public confrontation scene would make the play too dramatic and betray the tone of the play which would, consequently, require more changes to be made. Adding a young character would also be disruptive. The different ending suggested is unnecessary since the friendship between the two has been excellently described already. In the movie adaptation, it ends with a black car slowly rolling away which is coherent to the play and further highlights the importance the car had in creating this unbreakable friendship, and

the difference between human and AI intervention. The employment of the automobile trope is deliberate and quintessentially American.

What this shows, then, is that while there are limitations to programmed information, there is no limit to human imagination. In addition, the warmth and simplicity which makes this play so likeable will lose all its charm when presented in a formulaic way. When there is human agency involved in creation, interpretation and appreciation of a literary text, the result is always more human which in other words means more artistic for all art is the expression of the artist. This artist's creation stems from experience, memories, culture, beliefs and many other such things, and not from a formulaic analysis of data. Even in case of interpretation, AI can only base it on available data and therefore, cannot come up with fresh and unique perspective unless of course, it is based on some complex permutation and combination of existing theories. Finally, since appreciation is, among other things, based on the readers experiences, beliefs and memories, AI's one size fits all approach will not work. This problem needs to be carefully dealt with not only when creating and consuming art but also when teaching and researching it.

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