

Sample Chapter from
[You Are What You See: Watching Movies Through a Christian Lens](#)
 by Scott Nehring — for review only.
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Morality Points

“I learned a lot about morality from fiction, from movies.”
 — Rob Morrow, actor

MY PROPOSAL THUS FAR HAS AN OBVIOUS PROBLEM: BY THE TIME YOU get the Answer to the Central Question you have already digested the entire film. What if the ultimate Answer is immoral or ungodly? Then what? Christ-followers have the tools to handle ungodly proposals and you probably will not be terribly harmed by one experience, but there are ways to determine the quality of a film without being forced to stick around for the ending. Here is where our understanding of story structure and characters of The Great Story comes into play.

1. Ken James. “The Emperor’s Club” Interviews: Rob Morrow as Charles Ellerby. 2002. <http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/2002/theemperorsclub-i-morrow.html>. Accessed November 2009. Used by permission. Rob Morrow played FBI Agent Don Epps in CBS-TV’s *Numbers*.

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We enter into a film with the knowledge that we will be presented a structure broken into four equal parts with a reversal in the middle. We also know the story will be populated by specific archetypes who each perform predictable tasks at specific moments within the story.

We can use this knowledge to identify key moments or common interactions in films and use these as stopping points—*Morality Points*—to evaluate what is on screen. At each of these morality points we face our own fork in the road: whether to continue to ingest or decide enough is enough.

We will begin by identifying important components of characters and their actions.

Character Introductions

Pay attention to how each character is introduced, particularly the hero. The old adage “you only have one chance to make a first impression” is true. Filmmakers meticulously craft how their characters are presented. In the initial seconds of an introduction we are given cues on how we are to feel about this person. The director will manipulate our perceptions to drive our emotions for or against a character.

In the opening shot of Hitchcock’s *Lifeboat*, we discover a ship has been destroyed in the middle of the ocean. The smokestack of the ship sinks below the surface, bodies bob in the waves, debris juts to the surface. Among the ruin, a single lifeboat floats above the wreckage. Soon we realize a woman is sitting in the boat. Once we get a closer look, we see she is not just a woman but a very glamorous woman dressed in fashionable clothing. She sits impatiently perched in the lifeboat as if she is waiting for the valet to return with her car. The woman looks down and sees a run in her stocking. She sighs in frustration. With horror and devastation around her, it is the run in her stocking to which she reacts.

Hitchcock’s careful sequencing not only set up the foundational facts of the film—the ship is sunk and all that is left is a lifeboat—but with her dress, demeanor, and reaction to her circumstances, we are given the basic facts regarding fashion columnist Connie Porter.

During a film’s opening, observe how the director attempts to manipulate his audience. Does he attempt to have us quickly denounce someone we might normally approve of, or to be apathetic toward someone we would otherwise have empathy for, such as Connie Porter? Does he want us to support someone we might normally loathe, such as the scavenging, untrusting Mad Max in *The Road Warrior*?

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During an introduction, the filmmaker is forced to make moral distinctions for the audience—to reveal their beliefs and intents to their audience.

In the same way you can learn a great deal about someone by the type of friends he has, you can tell much about a film and its maker by the character given the heroic role. A writer or director vouches for their hero character—they are plainly stating that this is the kind of person you should emulate.² For the Christian, the reaction to this introduction is simple: We should ask, “How much does this character reflect Christ?” Does the hero character adhere to Biblical standards or does he follow an ungodly path?

Character Names

What is in a name? Quite a bit actually. A character’s name can elicit deep emotional responses and provide insight into personality. We make assumptions about a person based on their name. It is fair to assume we would all rather get into a fender bender with a guy named Orville Lipschitz than one named Max Butt kicker.

When you are introduced to a character, make note of their name and consider the writer’s intentions. Screenwriters will often attempt to manipulate our thoughts regarding a character by giving them a name that can sound ominous (Nurse Ratchet), ridiculous (Sheriff Buford T. Justice), or a mixture of the two (Snake Plisskin). In *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Will Turner’s name tells us what he will eventually do: he will turn.

It is common for the hero to have a larger-than-life name, one clearly stating he is a man’s man, for example, like John Rambo, Sam Spade, or James Bond.

James Bond is a great example. His name is one of the most recognizable in modern Western Civilization. His first name is always the formal “James,” never Jim, Jimmy, or Jimbo. The use of James gives him an air of civility if not haughtiness. His last name is a short, thud of a word, but it is a marvelous word that conjures strength, reliability, security, usefulness. When he introduces himself as “Bond. James Bond,” his formal, family name becomes a replacement for “Mister.” In effect he introduces himself as Mister Holds-Things-Together or Mister Strength. Not bad for two syllables.

2. The purpose of some movies such as satire or black comedy is to point out an inappropriate personal or cultural characteristic. In these films, the hero is not intended to be emulated but rather is to show how we should *not* be and why.

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A hero's name does not always give the sense of power. With today's penchant for anti-heroes—rudderless half-men cast in the heroic light—we often have a main character given a name that signifies a dork, a lout, or a loser.

Travis Bickle, the smoldering assassin in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, has a name that tells us he is never going to amount to much. The awkward sounding combination of his first and last names warns us this guy is not cut out for heroic work.

We find the same result in *The Usual Suspects'* Verbal Kint. Verbal? His name is Verbal? He is a criminal and his name means “to blab”?! Not a great handle to carry around in the underworld. He is cast as the weak one in his group of thieves and his name states it is the appropriate place for him, particularly since the other men in his crew have names like Dean Keaton and Michael McManus. Who is the tough guy? Mr. Kint or Mr. McManus?

A writer may attempt to use our reliance on names to capture our approval of someone we would never normally like, or to loathe someone we should respect. It may seem a minor detail, but the name has deep impact on how we perceive that character and on how we are willing to interact with them. A charismatic character with an attractive name, Jack Sparrow for example, makes it easier for us to ignore things like his constant thieving and lying and his references to his history of rape and murder.

Occupations

Other than soldiers, cops, crooks, and spies, most heroes do not make ends meet by being a hero. They usually have day jobs. Indiana Jones was a history professor, Andy Dufresne (*The Shawshank Redemption*) was an accountant before his incarceration, and Navin Johnson (*The Jerk*) was both a gas station attendant and a carnie before he became an inventor.

As in real life, a character's job says a great deal about who they are and what we can expect from them. We see a teacher on screen, our initial reaction is trust and we assume they are intelligent and somewhat compassionate. If we see a garbage man, right or wrong we assume he is not so bright and perhaps a little boorish. These assumptions may not be fair, but they play a role in how we define each other.

In film, a character's job will be a primary definition to the audience of who that character is. Once again, if we look to Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver*, we see a shiftless young man who performs a job that is shown as meaningless. This tells us he is not a man of vision or high expectation.

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Note, too, that the actual job is not as important in discerning the filmmaker's intent as how that occupation is presented.

**The way an occupation is shown on screen
will explain to you
how the filmmaker defines the world.**

Are the police shown as brutes willing to bend rules (*American Gangster*)? Is a nurse shown as a living saint, calmly and patiently healing the sick (*Band of Brothers*)? Is the President of the United States represented as a wise leader and great statesman (*Deep Impact*)?

The way an occupation is shown can also manipulate how we think of certain lines of work. Wesley Gibson (*Wanted*) is tormented by his menial life inside an office cubicle. He sits hunched over his desk, barely tolerating his coworkers and manager. The film goes to great lengths to explain to the audience that Wesley's work is meaningless and therefore his life is without value. He is a shell of a man—until he learns his father was a great assassin and an order of assassins recruits him to join their ranks. Then, and only then, does he become someone worthwhile.

The two sides of Wesley are summed up by his mentor, Sloan:

It's a choice, Wesley, that each of us must face: to remain ordinary, pathetic, beat-down, coasting through a miserable existence, like sheep herded by fate—or you can take control of your own destiny and join us, releasing the caged wolf you have inside.³

In the trailer for the film, the first part of this quote is played over images of Wesley working in an office. In the view of the filmmakers, someone who works in a cubicle is a meaningless cog with no real worth. The audience gets this message either consciously or subconsciously and, since a vast majority of the audience members probably spend most of their time in an office, they are learning it is *they* who are without value. Someone watching *Wanted* will not automatically feel they are a pitiful waste, but add this dribble to the steady drip and it does reinforce the perception that ordinary work is somehow loathsome and empty.

Combine this film with other productions which show average office work as dehumanizing and miserable (*Office Space*, *The Matrix*, *The Incredibles*,

3. Michael Brandt, Derek Haas, et al. *Wanted*. Universal Studios. 2008.

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Fight Club, *Joe Versus the Volcano*), and a motif emerges which impacts how we view office work. This manipulation is one way a film works to undermine our current values and our appreciation for other people's labor.

Character Flaws

Heroes are larger than life. They are super-human. Each is a notch above the rest of us, someone we want to emulate. They are, as I have mentioned, Christ-like and therefore reflections of God, Himself. Like the gods of the world's polytheistic religions, our modern heroes are not God—they are god-lite. What keeps them from being God? They are each afflicted with a flaw.

Every great hero has his Achilles' heel. Indiana Jones is scared of snakes, Fletcher Reede (*Liar, Liar*) is consumed with his work, and Tony Stark (*Iron Man*) is a drunk. Their flaw makes them human and reduces them to our size so we can identify with them.

Such is also the case with Jesus Christ. He is God who willingly came down to our level. He became one of us to stand in our place and shed His blood in ransom for our souls. His "flaw" (if you will permit my use of that term in this context) is His humanity, His mortality. He Who is God became flesh with a definite capacity to feel pain and loneliness, to hunger and thirst, to die; those were His weaknesses. He was tempted by Satan only because He became flesh, a man, and He identified Himself among us because we are unable to identify or even recognize Him (Heb. 4:15).

In the end, Jesus overcame temptation, indeed overcame mortal death, itself, and is now at the right hand of the throne of God—the Christ, our Ultimate Hero (Heb. 8:1, 12:2; Eph. 1:20).

While we may not have much in common with a suicidal, nearly-psychotic cop such as Martin Riggs, many of us can identify with his addiction to cigarettes and his attempt to quit (*Lethal Weapon 2*). Even if we do not smoke, his petty attempts to quit smoking allow us brief moments of humor and commonality with the over-the-top character.

Flaws are not only for heroes, either. Villains have them as well. The difference is that a villain's flaw (Kahn's thirst for revenge in *Star Trek: The Wrath of Kahn*) will consume him, while a hero can overcome his flaw (Scottie Ferguson's fear of heights in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*). The hero copes with his flaw; the villain embraces his and allows it to command his motivations.

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Take note of character flaws as they are presented. What is the hero's main flaw? How is it handled? Is the flaw truly a flaw or something stated as being a flaw that, in truth, is a strength?

Will Turner in *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* is a proper, good, young man. He believes in right and wrong and in social order. His adherence to the social good is his main "flaw," the thing which keeps him from being able to attract Elizabeth Swann. Only after he sheds his social standing and his morality to become a dreaded pirate like his father, does he manage to get the girl and become truly heroic.

**When you find that the hero's character
flaw is something that would Scripturally be
considered an attribute, you know to be careful
of what you are watching.**

Forks in the Road

Life is a series of choices. Every day we choose between right and wrong, good and evil, smart and stupid. Sometimes the choices in life are obvious events where we know our decision will have a huge impact: Do I say "yes" to the marriage proposal? Do I take this job? Do I put my house on the market?

The hero normally has one or more instances in a film in which he is given a yes-or-no moment and his morality comes into play. You can note these moments because the action will pause and the hero will be shown pondering his decision, even if it is for a brief moment (Joe pauses on his first time up the stairs in *Sunset Blvd.*). Does Deckard reveal to Rachael that she is not actually a human but rather a man-made replicant (*Blade Runner*)? Does Frodo remain loyal to Samwise or does he succumb to Gollum's lies (*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*)? Does Detective Mills kill John Doe or does he allow the villain to live and the wheels of justice to dole out their punishment (*Se7en*)?

Many times these forks in the road occur within the final act and are the moment at which the hero takes on the value learned during his resurrection scene at the end of Act Three. There are times however, such as with *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, where the decision continues to deepen into the final conflict in the final act.

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**As a rule, any time the action stops in a film
you should be on guard because something
important is being delivered to you**

—be it a narrative element or a morality point. When this moment reveals a stark choice being made, it is very important to pay attention to what happens. At these moments we learn the character of our hero and the morality being peddled by the filmmaker. These moments teach us to laugh at violence and revenge as we watch Arnold Schwarzenegger decide to drop a man to his death (*Commando*) in the same way we learn mercy and forgiveness when we see Bruce Wayne pull Henri Ducard up from the cliff's edge, thus sparing the villain's life (*Batman Begins*).

Killing and Being Killed

Any time the hero kills someone, pay close attention. Killing and death are normally handled with little concern in modern films. It is common to see heroes mow down dozens of faceless bad guys with no moral consequence whatsoever. With movies like *The Wild Bunch*, *Rambo*, or *Death Race*, one expects death and killing to be treated with passing interest. One should not need to think too hard about these types of films to determine whether or not they follow a Biblical standard—the movie is called *Death Race*, after all. I think we can assume it is not a movie Jesus would pick for his collection.

The aspect of killing in a more serious film is another matter. Films such as *Million Dollar Baby*, *Paths of Glory*, or *Goodfellas* all wrestle with the subject of killing by suicide, war, and murder, respectively. When someone is killed in these films, there are very specific circumstances set up with clear moral frameworks to support them.

In *Million Dollar Baby*, the young boxer, Maggie (Hilary Swank), becomes paralyzed. Her trainer, Frankie (Clint Eastwood), must decide whether or not to pull the plug on her life support system. His choice to either kill the woman or to allow her to languish in her hospital bed is not treated lightly and prompts the audience to make their own moral choice along with Frankie.

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The issue of death is serious. When treated seriously in film, it can lead to great drama.

It will also be a clear moment where a filmmaker decides to value or devalue human life.

When you see a prominent killing or death in a film, take note of the circumstances. Discern what the event is saying.

Reaction to Death

It is common for someone close to the hero to die at some point. In many cases it will be a loved one (the herald) during Act One. This death will shatter the hero's world. The hero is shown in a moment of grief (Mal in *Silverado*), even sometimes shown standing over the coffin at a funeral (*The Green Mile*, *Watchmen*, *The Third Man*) or over the corpse itself (*Tombstone*). The hero's reaction to this death is important—the way in which it motivates his decisions and actions can shed light on the Biblical bent of the piece. Is the hero driven to violent revenge (*Unforgiven*)? Or is his reaction to forgive (*End of the Spear*)?

Reaction to Opposition

At the heart of the story is the central conflict between the hero and the villain. Their goals are diametrically opposed and only one of them can remain standing. We are asked to take the hero's side in this conflict and we usually do so without question. The villain is the villain, after all, and he must be stopped.

While we cheer for the hero, how does he oppose the villain? Does he approach conflict in a Scriptural manner (*The Patriot*, *Pride and Prejudice*)? Does he just go in guns blazing (*Taken*, *Payback*, *Sin City*) or does he allow opportunity for the villain to change his ways and try to reason with the bad guy, to offer him an avenue other than the road to perdition (*Shane*, *The Dark Knight*, *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith*, *Schindler's List*)?

Only the most heroic are able to extend a helping hand to those who would do them harm. A true hero reflects the patience and forgiveness of Jesus as he works to correct the villain rather than simply destroy him.

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At each of these film moments, these morality points, the hero is revealed to us. He is shown to be a worthy leader of men, a Christ-like man, or he is shown to be a criminal in heroic clothing. We must keep a watchful eye on how the hero both acts and thinks throughout a film because it is him we are meant to emulate.

If his choices are not aligned with Biblical thinking, we must reconsider whether or not the film is worth watching. Even if we choose to continue to watch the film after we determine he is clearly not a Christ-like hero, it is important for us to recognize him for what he is. We then understand that his story and his philosophy are unscriptural, and we can interpret the characters and the film with the skepticism they deserve.

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