Veritas Classical Academy

Burn This Thesis

On the Moral Obligation of the Artist to Society

Aidan Nayak

Senior Thesis

April 2021

Aidan Nayak

Veritas Classical Academy

Senior Thesis

26 April 2021

Burn This Thesis

On the Moral Obligation of the Artist to Society

General Introduction

The Arts, as social devices, provide three major functions: Edification, Education, and Entertainment. Complimenting one another and enriching the piece that they serve, these three functions work interweavingly to influence an audience in a profoundly emotional and enlightening way. By experiencing artistic reflections of humanity, we better understand our own nature and are able to view ourselves from an infinite number of varying angles. There is no better way to grasp this than through the arts of Film and Literature. Whether it be from the visual or written medium, stories of all genres, ranging from fantasy worlds of mythical heroes and villains to more familiar subjects of our own world and disciplines, each uniquely resonate with the human spirit that is fascinated by things like itself, becoming edified, educated, and entertained in the process. An artist's vision manifests itself in a finished work, dense with characterizations, allusions, symbols, and zesty pieces of life that grant the composition its significance and enduring spark. However, many works have come under attack for depictions of counter culturalism, overt grotesqueness, and frequent displays of sex and violence. Many efforts have been made to move even the most essential films and books out of their contextual frame to discredit and cancel them. How much is lost when rich and enlightening stories are invalidated on the grounds of elements that, while still repellent, are essential to the overall moral heft of the

narrative? How can the audience understand the seriousness of the avarice-stuffed Doctor Faustus's lust, heresy, and general vice if they are not displayed to them in all the evil that they entail? How can the puzzling Red of *The Shawshank Redemption* actually be redeemed if he (and by extension, the audience) do not witness the heinous acts of fallen humanity inflicted on his fellow inmates? The point of this thesis is to show how the Artist has no prescribed duty to serve the public on account of never claiming to be the holder of Truth or the arbiter of morality in the first place; to censor and put parameters on their work is to limit a fully realized vision, never permitting it to play out in the manner it is supposed to. However, a lesson in morality, the dichotomy of Good and Evil, and the competing value systems thereof, does *enrich* and *enhance* the Art to higher levels of edification, education, *and* entertainment. By exploring this subject through analyzing both traditional and atypical manners of storytelling, it will become simple to understand how these mentioned acts of atrocity and unrighteousness can serve a higher, justifiable cause of complimenting the primary point of the overall story: redemption.

Why it Matters: Plotinus and the Beautiful

Rising above all initial questions at the outset of this discussion may very well be the most important groundwork for the thesis itself: What makes something universally and undeniably Good? As it turns out, others have covered this topic long before this paper has been written. In fact, virtually every person who has ever contributed to the Take-A-Penny-Leave-A-Penny tray has to some degree had their run-in with deontological ethics (a phrase used for weighing the morality of an action under a series of parameters). Regardless, opinions and theories on the nature of that prospective untainted, celestial Good have risen up on nearly every pinpoint on the timeline, many of which will be dissected in greater detail as our conversation

continues. Nevertheless, it is worth our time to briefly examine the philosophical concepts proposed by the founder of Neoplatonic thought, Plotinus.

Plotinus stratifies three levels of Beauty into a hierarchy of divinity: The Divine Reason, Transcendent Beauty, and Sensible Beauty. Labeling Sensible Beauty as the lowest level, Plotinus reasons it as the perceptible beauty, or that which is physically beautiful. Above this is Transcendent Beauty where virtue resides and, if used properly, leads to Wisdom, or what he calls Intellect. Finally, chief among the stages of Beauty is the Divine Reason, a Being that personifies True Existence and is ontologically in harmony with the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. In pursuit of rising through these stages of Beauty, souls themselves become beautified and more complete. However, by disregarding intellect and virtue in favor of carnal passions, believing them to be "truly beautiful," a soul becomes ugly and disgusting.

Whether this hierarchy of the Divine is actually the way that the heavenly strata arrange themselves, to recognize a higher author orchestrating an overarching metanarrative is essential in extracting the full value of any story, be it film, literature, or some other medium. Even agnostic of denominational religion or spiritual factions, a recognition of an eternally authoritative narrative--a divine web of storytelling that all stories revolve around, exemplify, and even subvert--is a humbling frame of mind for any to be educated, edified, and entertained to the fullest extent. Reading a book or watching movie is a fun time, but often unnoticed is what lies at the root of this pastime: witnessing a story unfold is a spiritual experience, a masterclass on the human condition in all of its intricacies. A level of trust is constructed--and often broken--between author and audience when both parties take notice of this subconscious transformation that takes place within as we play the part of bystander in someone else's transformation. We become empowered. We are moved to tears. We laugh out loud. Our emotions take control of us

as we become conscious of the great potential of humans to do so much Good, or just as much Evil.

All We Do is Argue: Tracing the History of Social Utility in the Arts

Post-classical cinema started with the heavy hitters: Scorsese, Coppola, Spielberg, and Lucas. Prior to these industry giants are names a little less familiar to the average movie-goer; they are the pioneers of New Age cinema who took the broad strokes characteristic of the art of filmmaking and refined them into something more unique: Bergman, Fellini, Kurosawa, and Ford. Inspiration does not come from nowhere, and exploring the works of these geniuses reveals exactly where theirs comes from. Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* is a straight carbon copy of a medieval church painting he admired in Stockholm depicting the grim figure of Death gambling with a man through a game of chess, a snapshot very reminiscent of the life-in-death scene from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Kurosawa is famous for his obsession with the works of Shakespeare, loosely adapting *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* into *Throne of Blood*, *The Bad Sleep Well*, and *Ran* respectively. The list of artist-to-artist inspirations goes on and on and on. Even the first Neolithic storytellers understood the general structure of drama to recount stories around the fire. There were details that got the other oafs hooked. There were things that made them actually interested in the story. Likewise, there were things that made them get up and move to the dark corner to hang out with the bugs, preferring to be nibbled on by creepy-crawlies than have to listen to their prehistoric friends ramble aimlessly about something that has no value whatsoever. Long pauses for effect and plain exaggeration had to have been just as common for them as they are at any contemporary dinner table.[1]

[1] Do not think for an instant Mr. Neanderthal was telling the truth about the size of that mammoth he took down last week.

We emote when something we witness has an effect on us in individually unique ways. What is and is not included in the story will change the widespread reaction we receive from our audience. Martin Scorsese boils the storytelling of the big screen down to two things: “Cinema is a matter of what’s in the frame and what’s out” (Lannom). In fact, a joke works in much the same way as a story; the exposition is laid out, the rules are set, and the audience is convinced they know what is coming, *until* the rug is yanked out from under them and their expectations are entirely wrecked. Each storyteller invites an audience to ride an emotional rollercoaster, where they process the dramatic stakes and experience the passionate release of a narrative thoroughly, frequently emerging from the journey as a changed individual. The artist conducts the train, and viewers, trusting in their experience, are along for the ride. There is no work more essential to grasping the complexities behind a story than Aristotle’s *Poetics*, just as there is no work more essential to grasping the adjoining criticism directed at such complexities than Plato’s *Republic*.

Perhaps no other experiment has sculpted Western moral philosophy and politics more than Plato’s *Republic*. Written in the 4th Century BCE, *Republic* stands as a monument to what occupied the bulk of Athenian conversation circles. In an effort to define that which is truly “Just,” Plato offered hypothetical dialogues with his companions about each institution that constitutes a society, expounding on the nature of government, communities, industries, and, most pertinent to our discussion, the theater. An ongoing discourse sprang up from the heart of *Republic*, causing innumerable debates and factions all around Athens as philosophers quickly became either zealous defenders of artistic sovereignty or self-aggrandizing pedants who advocated artistic parameters. Reflecting on this time, historians typically regard Plato as the leading representative of the latter camp, critical of drama and the possibility for indoctrination through what was performed on the stage. His primary criticism rested on the point of artistic

imitation, or *mimesis*. Simply put, Plato feared that stories were easy to misinterpret if they covered subject matter even the slightest bit controversial. Believing young minds to be highly impressionable and unable to discern between a thing and its staged imitation, the philosopher dismissed the notion of granting the city's poets total artistic sovereignty. In Book X of *Republic,* Plato writes: "Therefore, seeing their works, they do not recognize that these works are third from what *is* and are easy to make for the man who doesn't know the truth--for such a man makes what look like beings but are not" (Plato 599a).

Continuing with this logic, Plato asserts that tragedies and drama succeed "in maiming even the decent men, except for a certain rare few" (Plato 289). If the arts were devoid of social messages and guidance, the Athenian proposed, then the lines become too blurred for any viewer to distinguish between imitations and reality, which in turn disparages their moral judgement. Interestingly enough, this notion was popularized and brought a new fascination in many modern film analysis circles by YouTuber Lindsay Ellis who stated, "The framing will supersede the text of the film *in the viewer's mind* always always always" (Kelly). To return to 4th Century BCE Athenian life, what especially angered Plato was how easy it was for poets and prose writers alike to misrepresent valuable people and institutions in extremely detrimental ways, either purposefully or accidentally portraying moral people as miserable and the more debauched folks as truly happy. Seeing morality as good for someone else but a punishment for oneself was a threatening slippery slope for Plato.

This is not to say that the great Athenian thinker completely closed off his eyes and ears to all aspects of art as an entertainment medium. On the contrary, Plato saw the overwhelming power held by poetry, theater, prose, and more to take total control over an audience and mold them for good. Of course, he wholeheartedly rejected the weaponizing of artistic endeavors to

promote inherently evil themes and subjects from being portrayed. He even went a step farther, saying, "Is that a fine way to praise? We see a man whom we would not condescend, but would rather blush, to resemble, and, instead of being disgusted, we enjoy it and praise it?" (Plato 289). Those base desires hungered for by the Natural Man, the suppressed desires of our subconscious (conceptually tied to the psychoanalytic Freudian Shadow), arise comfortably when others like ourselves also praise the horrid. Repressed thoughts and emotions bubble to the surface of our bodies when we see our hero conveying the same innermost responses to his own tragedy on the stage. Violence as a type of pornography has become an entire field of study, as researchers examine the deep-rooted cause of human lust for train wrecks and Tarantino films. If this hero, a perfected paradigm of excellence, can show his feelings, we the audience should too. It would be healthy for us. It will bring us closer to the *ideal*. At least, that is what Plato feared the Arts would teach. To combat this harsh passion from boiling over, Plato pitches his solution to Glaucon (by means of his own teacher Socrates) in a blunt and radical fashion: "We'll expunge all such things" (Plato 63). Persisting in his new doctrine of censorship, he suggests:

> "We'll beg Homer and the other poets not to be harsh if we strike out these and all similar things. It's not that they are not poetic and sweet for many to hear, but the more poetic they are, the less should they be heard by boys and men who must be free and accustomed to fearing slavery more than death" (Plato 64).

Whether it comes down to pivotal civics lessons that will change the fabric of the Western world or trivial matters of etiquette, negating the instruction of a teacher is equally daunting as it is rebellious. Such was the case with Aristotle when he subtly dismantled Plato's entire argument by expounding on the complexities of narrative storytelling.

Found in his essential *Poetics* is the root of all future screenwriting, poetry, world building, and story work guides implemented in writing today. Encapsulating some of the earliest workings of drama theory and a methodology for analyzing literary elements, Aristotle's *Poetics* is a seminal essay that is systematic in its approach to understanding the reasoning behind each included element in a work. Due to the treatise's length, our focus must be limited to his categorizations of the emphasis and degrees of incidents.

In just one section, Aristotle prioritizes the structure of each *incident* in a tragedy above the representation of the characters involved in the story, moving the spotlight from a good, old-fashioned character-study to a lens that views those men as the result of their actions and experiences. Character-studies themselves come as supplemental to the hustle and flow of each event that ushers the tragedy towards the end it aims for. Action is far more important to the unfolding of tragedy than character is, according to the philosopher himself. Understanding this, he expounds on the pivotal and dual roles played by *reversals* and *discoveries* as plot devices for expediting the necessary conclusion of the tragedy itself. The most tragic (that is, tragic in the most positive and artistically moving sense) of narrative structures hinges on an overall Good character being thrust into misfortune through bad circumstances caused not by his own sinful actions, but rather a great flaw he is inclined towards. Seeing these conditions, audiences are more likely to sympathize with the Hero who has not brought about his downfall proactively but rather through the necessity to be redeemed.[2] One of the final points Aristotle makes in this section is settling the question of which is objectively better: epics or tragedies? He deduces that, according to the audience, "the art which makes its appeal to everybody is eminently vulgar," (Aristotle 24) assuming that the better form of representation is also the less vulgar one. Through

---

[2] This is an important distinction to make and will serve the reader greatly in understanding the later analysis of *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*.

the demonstrations of theatric actors and people dressed up as trees in the background, Aristotle says that tragedy would appeal to a lower class of greater numbers, and therefore it would seem to be the most inferior. However, he adds that this is not necessarily the case *because* of the independence that tragedy has from character-studies and likewise from actors. Game-changing and valuable for his day and ours, the influence of Aristotle's *Poetics* on tragedians, poets, philosophers, filmmakers, and media-consumers alike cannot be understated. In fact, most of Aristotle's primary points would be resurrected and restated about 300 years later by the Roman poet Horace, who observed the cultural disconnect with what each demographic of audience members looks for in a play: the old folks demand moral substance, the youngsters want to see heads rolling.

Fifteen hundred years later in Renaissance-era England, the quill is picked up by poet Philip Sidney. Motivated by the scathing critiques of the theater published by playwright Stephen Gosson, Sidney wrote *The Defense of Poesy*, in which he loyally vindicates the role of an author as sovereign in dictating his vision. Sidney is defending *imaginative literature*. He views the artist's work as an imitation of the life of man, and not strictly a guide to man's virtues; it is requisite of the author to show man in his complete, fallen form: his vices, passions, lusts, and ignorance *in addition to* his desire to know, to improve, and to be responsible. Sidney is obsessed with the writings of Plutarch, in particular citing his *How the Young Man Ought to Study Poetry*, from which he derives his central idea of the responsibility of the reader to differentiate the Good from the Bad in the content he indulges in. For Sidney, the synthesis between the rawness of history and the strenuous discipline of philosophy is in fact poetry, a hybrid that overshadows its two individual parts taken individually.

In his *Arcadia*, Sidney presents us with a motley crew of characters filled to the brim with every vice known to man, but whose purpose in the scope of the play serves to make the audience shun their bad decisions and laugh at them for their impiety and stupidity. On the other hand, *Arcadia* features four main characters, two princes and two princesses, who, while attempting to act as good and respectable protagonists, also give in to the same whims that plague the human condition. Sidney lets no one off the hook and shows that the expression of vice leads to a greater reward in the minds of every audience member present: strive for the best, but know you are by definition a fallen and disgusting human being. Yet through all this, Sidney's goal in delighting and entertaining his audiences remains to edify and drive them to better actions.

There are qualitative differences between the great disputes of Plato vs. Aristotle, Sidney vs. Gossen, and all the other brilliant thinkers that came head-to-head with one another. Each argue in a different frame with different influences, provoked by different opponents. This frame is subject to change with the cultural climate and the preferred area of interest. Matters of priorities shift over time, and there is no doubt about that; however, there are many points of union throughout each of their thesis statements, as there is with mine. Topics such as responsibility, artistic taste, entertainment, and the true moral good are always going to be the overarching umbrellas of this debate. They are enduring qualities that are placed in many different contexts, making navigating them increasingly difficult amidst all the multiplying problems of the world. Because of this, analyzing the historical philosophies behind these topics in terms of individual creative works must be the most productive lens to examine them through.

Don't Tell Mom: *Lysistrata*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and the Subversive Redemption Arc

Many modern invocations of Sidney's defense are directed at an unconventional redemption arc, that which does not inherently end with moral catharsis or a lesson to be learned. For the sake of clarity, we will label this as the "Subversive Redemption Arc." Often condemned as sinful and without substance, these types of stories revolve around the age-old adage *Ars Artis Gratia*; they neither exist for the sole purpose of allegory, nor are they beholden to any parameters of orthodox storytelling, which are most often associated with Joseph Campbell's Monomyth. Tracking a hero's flaws, growth, and subsequent redemption, the Monomyth is a formulated structure drawn from nearly every mythological tradition around the world and is often hailed as the universally fool-proof anatomy for any story. However, the Subversive Redemption Arc disposes the conclusion of Campbell's Monomyth, replacing classical redemption arcs with a more contextual atonement, in which a character is absolved of their past self and becomes reoriented on a new value system, one that is not an innately righteous characterization but rather a reinvented Ego. A contextual morality is set up, but it is certainly not one the viewer is enticed to accept.

On this matter, there is no difficulty in understanding how much more the Subversive Redemption Arc demands from the viewers themselves. Although the artist is sovereign in interpreting the objective scope of the work, the attention of the audience is requisite in making the distinction between the practically imitable and the artistically unadvisable. The demand that these particular stories require from us is astronomically heavier than the burden necessitated from works like a conventional Hero's Journey-style narrative or, even more so, a just-for-fun sitcom. Despite proving to be a cultural phenomenon and major leap forward in cinematic history, *A New Hope* is still a mostly predictable tale to even the most surface-level viewers due

to its oft-repeated story beats. George Lucas was literally one-handing a copy of Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* while composing the journey of Luke Skywalker. It is hard to negate that Campbell's structure is the most universal, the most familiar, and doubtlessly the most marketable template of storytelling.

Denying *Star Wars* a place in the legendary seminal works of Western society would be foolish. It is an enduring example of the traditional Hero's Journey structure working beautifully to a composition's benefit. Likewise, with the epic poem that started it all, perhaps the most expertly crafted tale of adventure in the history of Western canon: *The Odyssey*. Remove all particulars of Homer's epic, and what remains is the barebones outline for *any* hero's trek. While readers keep this idea in mind, they see how Odysseus' journey can be *theirs*. The character of Odysseus may be defined, but his role is impersonal (he even throws out a fill-in-the-blank name in Polyphemus's cave: No-Man). The human condition makes us sojourners, navigating shaky roads of tests and trials, allies and enemies, losses and victories, and, when properly accomplished, a satisfying ending.

To return to the subject, the whole point of the Subversive Redemption Arc is not to snicker at or call Campbell's structure "lame" or "oversaturated;" the whole point of the Subversive Redemption Arc is to *subvert* the status quo, thereby calling into question "the way things are." Adopting this form of storytelling does not automatically elevate a work above any alternative method, but instead widens the range of output produced by authors and directors alike who have nontraditional stories of the human condition artfully told in a reinvented way.

In 5th century BCE Athens, no one was commanding the theater quite like Aristophanes. Acclaimed by his contemporaries and ours as one of the most talented Comedic Playwrights of all time, Aristophanes is central to our discussion of morality as a social tool in the Arts. This

man was pioneering social commentary, blue humor, and some of the finest irony ever delivered over 2000 ago. And just like every other artist who becomes a soaring household name, he soon became the target for an old-school Athenian cancel culture campaign led by none other than Plato himself, condemning the playwright for gross representations and slander that landed his teacher Socrates on death row. All of these details make Aristophanes's legendary comedy *Lysistrata* even funnier.

Cheeky for its day and even for ours, *Lysistrata* is a fictional narrative that conveys the exhaustion felt by the women of Athens while their spineless husbands were busy not winning the Peloponnesian war against the Alpha-male Spartan men. The women of Athens rally around the charismatic personality of Lysistrata, a lady so fed up with the prolonged war that she devises a solution. She calls the matrons of Athens together: a zany ensemble of caricatures of housewives, giddy schoolgirls, and even a sturdy Spartan woman who speaks in a back-woods dialect and rivals the masculinity of the Athenian men. She stirs them up with great authority, as they shout that they want nothing more than for their husbands to return from the war. Shining with her cult of personality flair, Lysistrata asks the party, "If I can devise a scheme for ending the war, I gather I have your support?" (Aristophanes 359). Enthusiastically the ladies all throw their hat in the ring and unanimously agree to do whatever it takes to bring the men home. Lysistrata then unveils her master plan for ending the war: a sex strike.

Regardless of the initial shock, we ask ourselves what Aristophanes is getting at by including a sex strike as the main plot device that drives the central narrative. Readers are left to speculate whether this move was motivated by symbolism, a reach for the esoteric, or simply perversion.

At surface level, Aristophanes is writing *Lysistrata* as a lens into the Athenian dichotomy between the warmongering men who had been fighting the same monotonous war for nearly 30 years, and the anxious women who acted with cunning to take matters into their own hands. Further analysis shows that in many ways he is preserving a more localized, personal part of his nation's history through a fictionalized piece of satire. This is demonstrated beautifully in the following manner.

As the conflict unfolds, we the audience become acutely aware of what sets Lysistrata apart from the average Athenian woman. She is depicted as a strong leader with a strong will, devoted with the utmost passion to ending the war through whatever means necessary. On the flip side, the sexually starved wives who follow her, in making up flimsy excuses underlined by double entendres, all too often ditch Lysistrata's group meetings so they can go home to get satisfied by their husbands. The excuses grow lazier and lazier until one random lady rushes onto stage yelling, "O Goddess of Childbirth, grant that I not deliver until I get me from out of this sacred precinct!" to which an annoyed Lysistrata responds, "You weren't pregnant yesterday." (Aristophanes 411). There is no contest needed to determine who the brightest woman in Athens really is. Lysistrata shines far above the other women of her rank in intelligence, leadership, and pure conviction, all topped with a fiery wit. And as the story continues, and the jokes shed their layers of subtlety becoming progressively more vulgar (though admittedly pretty clever), Aristophanes demonstrates her superiority over not just the women, but also both the Athenian *and* Spartan men. In fact, the one scene in particular that highlights this is really a scene that crosses the line from innuendo to blatantly explicit; that being said, it is this very scene that provides a sort of vindication for the overall narrative, an understanding of the contextual redemption (i.e. the Subversive Redemption) occurring between the lines. In order to unite the

warring Athenians and the Spartans, Lysistrata poses an option for peace to end the central conflict…in the form of a totally naked girl who represents a map of Greece. Following an otherwise uncomfortable section where they "carve up" the provinces and allot pieces of the Mediterranean to one other, the two armies retire as brothers, celebrating the end of the tragic war and preparing to go home and be relieved by their wives. Lysistrata has successfully appeased the two countries in contentment, and they all lived happily ever after.

Who is the true hero of *Lysistrata?* In my mind I assumed the obvious hero (or heroine in this case) was Lysistrata; here is an audacious patriot with so strong a love for her country, someone who is not feigning leadership but fully and authentically believes she can put an end to *the* Peloponnesian War that she single-handedly coalesces the entire female population of Athens to make their move. Now that is bold. Near the end of the play, when her less extraordinary followers begin to desert the cause, one tiny line reveals another aspect of the protagonist not yet seen. As she watches the tragedy of the dying revolution unfold and sees her weak companions rushing to their husbands' bedsides, she stops speaking her poetic lamentations, drops her aura of leadership, and lets slip, "We want to get laid" (Aristophanes 409).

Crafting main characters (or any characters for that matter) as flawed, fallen, and in need of redemption paints them as realistic and human; but what kind of a resolution is that for a main character to arrive at? "We want to get laid." This is coming from the immovable Lysistrata herself. Lines like these speak volumes to her realization of the nature of humanity. Speaking in the terms and context of 5th century BCE theater, she verbally resigns herself to the insane proclivity of her sex to trail after the men of Athens and become dependent on them. "Well that's the way things are," she admits, "I've lost my grip on the girls--they're mad for men!" (Aristophanes 409). Most sensible modern audiences might contest the point of characterizing *all*

women as the same type, but to argue on that front would be neither productive nor necessary. Instead it is worth noting the technical brilliance of Lysistrata's epiphany, and how it spells out the resolution of the play.

At the very moment Lysistrata becomes awakened to the true nature of her followers and horrified by their disloyalty, she arrives at the answer to ending the war. This time, it does not come in the form of restricting a privilege to their men. This time, when she brings together the men and the women of both Athens and Sparta, she gives them *exactly* what they want: the men get the virility and dominance that comes with conquered territory along the Mediterranean in the form of the aforementioned "Peace Treaty," and their wives get the contentment and security of having their husbands back home.[3]

In some of the final lines delivered by Lysistrata at the play's end, she makes a plea to both sides that, while sounding kind of flimsy, remains contrary to the bizarre approach she took to end the war just pages before: "Each man stand by his wife, each wife by her husband. Dance to the gods' glory, and thank them for the happy ending. And, from now on, please be careful. Let's not make the same mistakes again" (Aristophanes 456).

Lysistrata's plea hinges on marital and spiritual reverence, which makes it odd when considering that neither of these in their truest forms should warrant a sex strike or excessive lust under any circumstances. Instead, as per the format of the Subversive Redemption Arc, the Athenians and Spartans become oriented on a new value system (one that could prove fragile in the long run according to the story's morality) that would replace their old ways of promiscuity and dependence on sex with a new mode of life that fosters dual respect and dependence on a healthy marriage.

---

[3] All of this section was underlined by an overtone that, while important, I glossed over because of time and suitability.

A mark of Aristophanes' total control of his craft, this ironic reversal of our expectations packs a hefty punch. He spends the whole narrative painting a debauched parody of his own native stomping ground, fills it to the brim with morally flawed characters and obscene jokes to complement their personalities, and wraps it up with a questionable resolution (the Naked Peace) to say something about the war that his play centers on: at the end of the day, the greatest peace comes in cutting your losses, returning home, and sleeping with your wife. There is, of course, more to it than that, but it is an oversimplification that would not have been lost on viewers of his time. It may not sound like the moral route, but with command over the Subversive Redemption Arc, Aristophanes relinquishes objective truth to the wind and writes a story about peace, a story whose laugh-out-loud humor and deep irony were exactly what was needed in communicating a bleak, but no less necessary message to his fellow Athenians. We can have the ethics talk in relation to *Lysistrata* all day long, but to try to cancel the play's resolution on account of immorality would be ridiculous and ignorant. *Lysistrata* was way ahead of its time for cultural revolutions.

The means by which Aristophanes arrives at this conclusion on the state of marital congruence in Athenian society is without question shaky and unsettling to our Western conception of the Good. These means were indeed shaky and unsettling to the world that Aristophanes knew, a culture totally wrapped up in the dogmatic teachings of Plato against artistic provocateurs and authors of social disharmony. Yet there is no better (probably no other) way to tell the story that *Lysistrata* has to offer. All artistic sovereignty held by Aristophanes must be respected, even if the outcome sits uneasy in our stomach. The fact of the matter is that Aristophanes never *claimed* to be telling the truth. He crafts an interpretation of Athenian society that is silly and played for laughs, with his own view of Her politics and customs buried under

twelve layers of irony. His creative liberty soars, and we are better off for it over two millennia later as the discussion of Art and Morality roars on. And as the dominating manner of storytelling shifts from the words on a page to the pictures on the big screen, the reference point for criticism moves as well.

Few would contest auteur director Stanley Kubrick's position as one of the most controversial storytellers of the 20th century. From the riveting anti-war testimony of *Paths of Glory* to the uncomforting satire of *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,* Kubrick's films have endured as legendary pieces of art for more than half a century, solidifying him as one of the most influential directors of modern cinema. On top of all that, there is no better example of someone who values the artistic sovereignty of a creator over the corresponding backlash he could receive from a perturbed audience. In addition to the works listed above, a quick glance at his filmography is a highlight reel of some of the most infamous movies ever produced: *Lolita*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Yet nothing comes even close to the equal levels of debauchery and artistic prowess Kubrick couples and masterfully displays in one of his most famous works of all. Upon its release in 1971, the movie was banned in South Africa and Brazil. It was "Condemned" by the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures. That same year, it became one of the biggest box-office successes of all time. Perhaps no work is more relevant to discussing the Subversive Redemption Arc than Kubrick's dystopian epic, *A Clockwork Orange*.[4]

Alex DeLarge is just your average delinquent teen. His past times include caning the homeless, committing unspeakable acts of "ultra-violence," and listening to Beethoven. Besides carrying an intense passion for music, Alex has charisma to spare, a trait he weaponizes in

---

[4] For the scope of the paper, we will be focusing much less on particular details of the movie's content and more so on the artistic status that surrounds it.

leading his fellow "Droogs," a band of three misfits who puppy-dog after him and always do what he says (the comparison to Lysistrata is not neglected). Needless to say, throughout the course of the film Alex and his "Droogs" engage in the most degenerate behavior ever seen on the Big Screen. The price we pay for artistic sovereignty always comes at the expense of our innocence to some degree or another, but Kubrick chose to stand unwaveringly in defense of the Art he was producing. Eventually, Alex is eventually arrested for his horrific crimes at which point he becomes the subject of a government mandated rehabilitation experiment under the Minister of the Interior: the now-infamous Ludovico Technique, an aversion therapy test. Alex is forced to view acts of sin (violence, promiscuity, and throbbing neon lights from the 70's), which he does not take well. The Minister of the Interior is delighted when Alex, now robbed of his free will by a bureaucratic entity, gets sickened by watching the very things that once brought him pleasure. Alex has become a "Clockwork Orange": natural and organic on the outside, controlled and conditioned on the inside. He is a tainted fruit, no longer pure. Written on the film production's call sheet is Kubrick's barebones summary of what *A Clockwork Orange* is *really* about, saying, "It is a story of the dubious redemption of a teenage delinquent by condition-reflex therapy. It is, at the same time, a running lecture on free will" (Clockwork Orange). Those are Kubrick's own words: Dubious Redemption. We learn straight from the director's mouth what lays at the heart of this historically divisive film. And Kubrick is acutely aware of the artistry behind the debauchery. In no way does he actively shine a condemning light on the wickedness of Alex and his "little droogies;" on the contrary, scenes of "ultra-violence," sexual assault, and the mob-style life of crime are deliberately glamorized. The auteur stages Alex and friends' "shenanigans" in a hauntingly gleeful and even childish way, going as far as to instruct

Malcom McDowell (Alex) to dance like an elf and sing a rendition of "Singin' in the Rain" while thumping one of his random victims with canes and assaulting his wife.

Adapted from the 1962 book of the same name, *A Clockwork Orange* ought to be read as an ethical battle between the unrestrained potential of fallen individuality and the equally dangerous threat of totalitarianism. Alex is his own man for the first half of the film. He can do whatever he wants. Women, material goods, and, most of all, *authority* are his at the snap of a finger. This potential for evil to manifest itself is a plot point, and an important one no less. Without it, Alex has no need for a redemption, nothing to be striving towards. A hero's morality shines brightest when they are exposed to the underworld of depravity and actively reject the doctrine of Hell. However, Alex never gets the chance to actively make that decision. He is dehumanized, totally robbed of his agency, and made into a windup plaything for the powers that be. Once again, we have a story structure that does not inherently conform to Campbell's Monomyth, subverting the archetype in a similar method (though admittedly different style) to Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*. Here is a character in need of redemption but unable to admit it, whose free will is ripped from him, preventing a voluntary transformation altogether. The redemption must then come through **Kubrick's contextual scope of morality**. Alex's contextual atonement comes when he becomes rid of the influence of the Ludovico technique in the final moments of the film, his lust for violence and indecency returns to him, and he assuredly thinks to himself, "I was cured, all right!" Alex is redeemed not in terms of Western morality (the typical basis for a tale of redemption), but instead by the rules and machinations of the fictional universe of *A Clockwork Orange*. His fabulous life of dissipation comes as sweet relief to his formerly indoctrinated mind. He is free of the State. He regains his agency as the self-

determining clockwork falls apart, and his purging of authoritarian control reorients him on a basis of his former ways.

Sitting through a viewing of *A Clockwork Orange* is no restful walk-in-the-park. To enhance said viewing, one thing ought to be made clear: artist sovereignty does not mean public negligence. Feeble and corruptible, our minds are often allured by depictions of sin and stained by thoughts that enter our minds throughout the viewing. It is our civil responsibility to reject the siren song of the face value image in favor of grasping the deeper meaning that fuels the artist's need to include it. Much of this cautiousness springs from a resilient self-awareness, which emphasizes the necessity to truly "Know Thyself," and make the proper judgement call of whether it is safe to indulge in if one is knowingly prone to acting on dangerous desires. The purpose of this thesis is not to advocate indulgence in the worst of the worst forms of media on the sole basis that the artist is king, and therefore we should listen to him. Rather the purpose of this thesis is to assert that the artist has no prescribed duty to serve the public, on account that he never *claimed* to be the holder of the whole Truth in the first place. The Subversive Redemption Arc is an often-misunderstood expression of this principle.

The viewer must choose for themselves whether to watch *A Clockwork Orange* or not. It is just not right to call a work invalid because the content disgusts us. There is plenty of artistic merit, thematic richness, and technical brilliance buried deep in each scene of *A Clockwork Orange*, enough so that is has become an essential entry in the works of modern Western canon. The importance of this work cannot be overstated, and therefore, like in the case with *Lysistrata*, the responsibility of us as the viewers becomes even greater. Just as we read Plutarch's *Lives,* a monumental account of the lives of 48 historical legends, and differentiate the virtues from the vices of each subject in question, we must also do the same for any character study in film and

literature, which imitate life in some of its truest intricacies. Stories are battles between conflicting character values, and sometimes nobody is right.

It is worth advising to be careful in our viewing, and to not blame a Creator for the sin that his work may inspire. That line of thinking leads many down a slippery slope of loathing and nihilism, eventually arriving at the belief, "It would have been better if it never existed in the first place." When this frame of mind is adopted, artistry is lost. How many great works of the past and future are never made if we censor all that makes our stomachs churn? I say that we eliminate much more Good than Evil. The moral benefit of these works far outweighs the moral risk.

Medieval Cancel Culture: From the Mouths of St. John of Damascus and St. Theodore the Studite

In the area of artistic condemnation, there is nothing new under the sun. Defenses of an artform against public outcry and excessive censorship have existed for just as long as the art form itself, as we have already seen with the social utility arguments of Plato's and Aristotle's day. The ancient world bubbled with questions and criticisms targeted at nearly every playwright who wished to portray the full nature of fallen humanity in all its hideousness to the public. In many ways, this puritanical aversion to all depictions of sin, even those used for utilitarian or didactic purposes, hit its peak during the depressing millennium-long monotony of the Middle Ages.

The common people of Medieval times (especially the Late Middle Ages) were drained dry of hope and direction as they struggled to withstand the harsh circumstances of plague, the total collapse of world governments, papal disharmony, and many other major setbacks that made the average living condition just miserable. The theater landscape was still limited, and the

high illiteracy rate of the Europeans who remained after the Black Death made picking up a good book basically impossible. As far entertainment goes, Passion Plays, on-the-nose narratives, and anything that reminded the audience of their suffering in relation to Christ was pretty much it. Despite the lack of large-scale Medieval-era literary examples available to dig into artist sovereignty, there is a field even more suited to our discussion that will help us grasp the evolution of this debate throughout the darkest times in world history. It is a discipline whose tools and criticism are not too dissimilar from its brothers on the big screen: iconography.

To put is simply, iconography is a visual study. The iconographer analyzes the transmission of ideas and messages through the symbols and objects portrayed in a piece of art. These symbols and objects can operate at a surface level, in which we receive a pretty yet barebones portrayal of reality, human emotions, and other basic subjects; or, they can be buried between the lines, requiring an analysis of the subtext that conveys more subliminal messages. Long before people were able to complain about the moving pictures on the Big Screen or the complex fascia of a novel, paintings and icons were the topics of the day, encapsulating dozens of interwoven narratives and allusions that each had their own significance and power. This made the area of critique even broader for those harsh opponents of divine imagery. The sizzling question up for debate was unique to the dogmatic zeitgeist of a world that had remained in a moralistic echo chamber for centuries: how do we portray humanity's fallen nature in relation to the divine without being sacrilegious? As Medieval iconoclasts sought to dismantle all images of the divine whatsoever, a whole new band of artistic apologists adapted to this new cultural landscape in order to oppose them.

In the 8th Century CE, Christian monk St. John of Damascus criticized the iconoclast edicts of the Byzantine Emperor Leo III that promoted the wrecking and abandonment of divine

images. Leo's justification for this absurd act of blaspheming such a culturally significant expression of Christian theology was based on the fear of succumbing to idolatry, a practice frowned upon and condemned by the Second Commandment of the Decalogue: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4, KJV). St. John's objection to this spontaneous reform manifests itself in three surviving treatises that he drafts on the divine images. In Treatise I, he illustrates not simply the utility of visual aids in understanding the scriptures and adhering to the Natural Law of Father God, but even more so the *necessity* of images in "the way in which God relates to the created order through his divine intentions" (St. John, 10). Already declaring why the divine images are inherently good, John elaborates on their multi-faceted uses in scripture: foreshadowing, characterizing the Father, and distinguishing relationships between certain figures (i.e. The Trinity). He makes a sharp distinction between the veneration and respect we give to the Beautiful things, people, and occurrences that come from God (*Timē*) and the ultimate worship of a deity directed solely to God (*Latreia*). *Latreia* focused anywhere other than the Almighty is classified as idolatry. John wraps up the first treatise with a final argument that even if venerating images is condemned in the Old Testament, God changes that idea when he manifests his Begotten into a tangible body. Treatise II is regarded as a simplified version of the first, expounding on the idea of the change of sanctity of the divine images. Essentially, he rebukes Leo III for "piracy" and clarifies his final point from Treatise I: The Old Testament Jews inclined towards debauchery in the wilderness, acting on their tendencies to abandon God often, while the New Testament Christians are not bound by some proclivity. Therefore, the Jews were forbidden from making images, while the Christians are encouraged to through the gift of the Restored Covenant.

Finally, in Treatise III, John discusses the dual nature of humans (material and spiritual) and how icons operate in the same manner.

Not long after St. John's historic skirmish with the sitting pope, St. Theodore the Studite published three refutations of his own directed at the dicta of Byzantine Emperor Constantine V and his league of evil villains, who deemed that all depictions of divine things (excluding the Eucharist) are sinful. They asserted that Christ exists in two wholly distinct natures while remaining one fully realized being. Theodore responds in his first treatise with his own critique that Christ's human nature ought to be a thing of portrayal if it is indeed not mixed up with his celestial nature. His defense of this lays in the core truth that if Christ is not allowed to be depicted before *and* after his resurrection (as some iconoclastic sympathizers suggested), then He would not truly be man, humanity would be severed from God, and we would have absolutely no hope of being "partakers of the divine nature" (Theodore 16). He goes on to defend that idea that, while the prototype of the figure depicted in the image is of like nature to the image itself, we do not venerate the nature of the image but instead the prototype it displays. Continuing on, Theodore drops a counterargument to the logical inconsistency of the iconoclasts, revealing their hypocrisy in condemning prototypes while also honoring the cross, sacred objects, and the Gospels. In his second treatise, St. Theodore literally takes a page out of St. Basil's book and defends his notion of revering the Holy icons with a Trinitarian argument used to connect the Father and his Son: "The honor given to the image passes over to the prototype" (Theodore 13).[5]

St. John of Damascus and St. Theodore the Studite were no strangers to the threat of iconoclasm. They understood the deeper reverence and understanding of something that is sacrificed at the altar of fighting idolatry. Accepting the division line between the celestial nature

---

[5] His third treatise, a syllogism, is being omitted for the sake of staying relevant.

of the Almighty and the incarnated humanity of his begotten Son, these two Medieval Christian apologists formulated arguments that embodied the spirit of Ars Artis Gratia in a wholly religious conception. This makes perfect sense too. Religious foundations and doctrine are necessarily rooted upon enduring narratives, whether they be entirely factual, allegorical, mythological, or some weird hybrid. The idea of one universal, even Providential narrative that binds each individual of past and present would explain the abstraction of a Hero's Journey structure as a single template for every person to walk the planet. A rich metanarrative arises from our commonalities. This metanarrative is the origin of a wide array of technical means of storytelling by which we relate one story to another, be it through intertextuality, homage, or (my personal favorite) parody. Each of these are ways of connection. They are the reason we see so many parallels between the wanderings of Odysseus and literally every other hero who has ever come after him. They are the reasons we *do* judge a book by its cover, noticing similar images and titles that remind us of other books we have enjoyed in the past. They are much of the reason for the rising fame of acclaimed director Quentin Tarantino, a true master of borrowing imagery from other films to accentuate certain themes and messages in his own. The metanarrative resonates with our human spirit and allows us to build community through shared conceptualizations and understandings. If stories are metaphors for life, then what we *gain* from them are competing visions for how we ought to live our lives. Great storytelling is not just conflict between characters. It is conflict between characters and their *values*.

Both St. John and St. Theodore saw something deeply divine about using holy icons to direct pure worship to the Divine. They had a deep comprehension of the thick and nuanced layers of a metanarrative, and what said metanarrative says about our existence. No doubt different from our application, their assessment of divine images is critical in tracking the

evolution of the debate by the time it reached their pinpoint on the timeline. Rippling effects of their defenses are revivified in the modern context of defending the artist's role at the helm of their story; of course this goes both ways, as the Byzantines passed the baton to a more wild, predatory cancel culture.

The year 2019 was a strange year for cancel culture. As it turns out, the most targeted film of that entire year centered on a serial killer who dresses up like a clown and dances in the bathroom at 7-Eleven. The internet was quick in expressing its rampant outrage at the film's director, condemning him for promoting violence and anarchy through the anti-hero that his story follows. In an unexpected turn of events, several factions of ever-so slightly differing opinions on the movie split, and as is the case when people *almost* agree with each other, chaos ensued.

Todd Philips's *Joker* is not a totally bad movie. Loosely adapted from the characters and settings of the DC Universe, *Joker* is a wholly original storyline that has not been done before. It is a hypothetical origin story for the titular DC supervillain, except it is not at the same time. *Joker* is a character study of a character named Arthur Fleck, tracing his descent into madness at the hands of a society that has left him behind, until he ditches his position as a low-class stand-up comedian wannabe and transforms into the nihilistic serial killer known as Joker. It is a raw and gritty film about a man who succumbs to the dark underbelly of human nature, allowing it to fester into a Mephistophelian cynicism that derails him from any possible redemption. He hates existence, and in his mind, society is a direct incarnation of all the injustices of life. As a story about a psychopath, much of the critical analysis surrounding the film emphasizes the realistic portrayal of Fleck's struggle with fantasies, idle monotony, and lack of self-efficacy, with many parallels drawn from his own mindset to that of a school shooter. Eventually severing his

connections with society and taking on the mantle of the Joker, Fleck stirs mass panic and anarchy in the streets of Gotham, as the criminal network he unleashed glorify him as their messiah. It is an intensely religious scene, very reminiscent of the cults of the ancient and modern world alike, carrying overlap with the wild-haired fanaticism of the Bacchae and cults of Discordianism. Joker stands on a pedestal, as his rallying followers hail him as a prophet. Enveloped in the carnage and fire he himself wreaked, the Nietzschean prophecy comes to pass: “God is dead.”

Now, this characterization may trigger a few red flags, but these elements created a more thematically rich and thoughtful exploration of a false god; with a once-in-a-lifetime performance by Joaquin Phoenix, the character was respected completely and played with great ability, and therefore quickly became one of the stronger aspects of the film. Instead, the most unnerving side of the movie comes in its resolution.

When the film fades to black and the credits start rolling, the audience is left with an uncomfortable feeling about this Joker fellow. Upon considering the emotional climax of the movie and the closing sequence, the audience arrives at a shocking realization: Joker was actually right! He was right *in the context of the film*. Everything we watch this anti-hero do over the entire 122-minute run-time is so obviously messed up and wrong; he is so angered by social institutions that he goes on a maniacal killing spree. However, *in the context of the film*, every single one of his criticisms is valid. The upper-class echelon of Thomas Wayne is depicted as a bunch of evil rich people who literally stomp all over the little guy and harass women on subways. The entire atmosphere of Gotham is disgusting and nearly all of its citizens are involved in crime in one way or another. Even Fleck’s own mother has lied to him about his abusive upbringing, a possible link to his current mental instability. Every individual aspect of

Gotham city is crummy. The society that has left Arthur Fleck behind really is Hell. *In the context of the film*, he has every right to be vengeful of his society.

While most efforts to cancel this movie target its condoning of Joker's actions in a manner that could incite future violence and crime, its greatest problem lays at a deeper philosophical level. Despite a whole host of people who reject the Joker's notions of society, there is not one person in Gotham city who accurately serves as a moral foil to the antihero. Not one character embodies an antithesis to Joker's worldview on society as a whole. Instead each of them exist as a way of making his dangerously pessimistic outlook a reality, proving his point for him. Understandably, the addition of even one redeemable character to contrast with Joker's fallacious conclusion would have actually made it fallacious in the context of the film.[*] This may have very well been a conscious artistic decision on the part of the director, but it is a decision that sacrifices narrative cohesion all the same.

To avoid speaking in contradictions, it is worth specifying that the thesis argument still stands in the case of *Joker*: like it or hate it, director Todd Philips is sovereign. Those words are immeasurably important: like it or hate it. To say these words is to accept the way that things the sovereignty of the artist, while still granting room for the personal opinion that a work could be better. This is where we arrive at the caveat to the initial statement: although the artist has no prescribed duty to serve the public, the interwoven dichotomy of Good and Evil and the competing value systems thereof do *enrich* and *enhance* the Art to higher levels of edification, education, and entertainment. A work can be respected for its minimalism and humanistic approach to storytelling, but a lack of substance distances us from true redemption.

---

[*] The video essay page Nando v Movies had some really good insight on this.

The Changing Landscape of Renaissance Theater

In traveling from the restrictive and censored nature of Medieval entertainment to the antiquity redux and enlivening humor of the Renaissance is to find oneself at the dividing line between two vastly different cultures and climates; the former characterized by the grueling tediousness of life and barely making it to one's 30s, the latter by romanticism, levity, and a form of escapism that greatly influenced the changing essence of the theater. People were moved by different things, or at the very least they were more willing to admit to the things they had been moved by all along. Fear of offending the powers that be began to dial back as more complex characters and redemption arcs began to bleed on to the scene. Audiences were able to witness intricate tales of human achievement, as well as the joint struggles that come with being human in the first place. Expectedly, the appeal of watching actor after actor getting pinned to a cross for the sake of garnering a raw performance began to shrink. Viewers yearned for a more substantial narrative that could influence them in a more profound way.

Matters of propaganda through Religious and Homoerotic themes in Renaissance theater[6] were not condemned for their obvious sinful tendencies according to English custom, but instead were shied away from because of how easy they were to manipulate. Literary scholar David Bevington writes in his English Renaissance anthology, "Since religion was so closely intertwined with political and social institutions, plays could treat religious issues by seeming to focus on their social consequences, in a way that did not necessarily threaten the authority of the established church" (46). Bevington observes the revolutionary turning-of-the-tide that came with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, in particular how it used a morally satisfying ending to justify to the Puritan crowds all the sin that they just viewed over the course of the play. Censorship

[6] For the sake of this paper, I will just be focusing on the Religious part of the text.

laws prevented guilds from producing any plays with "overtly religious themes;" however, Marlowe makes use of thick satire and esoteric critiques of the Church's unwillingness to consider advancements like Copernican theories or Papal hypocrisy. Marlowe cleverly finds a loophole through all that legal gibberish and devises a thematically pleasing ending for his now-famous play: Faustus is damned for his unrighteous and uncensored quest for "wisdom." Attentive to detail and entirely aware of his role as "the Shaper," Marlowe was one sneaky playwright, opting to favor the dramatically engrossing elements of the play instead of strictly following censorship laws that could have prevented him from including them at all. Laying the foundation for nonconformists like Philip Sidney, Marlowe ushered in his own mini-Renaissance in rebirthing the idea of theater as a means to "new-mold the heart of the spectator even while the connection had been severed between that appeal to the heart and actual godly worship" (citation). Bevington discusses the profound moral message Marlowe grants his play in the satirical scene with the Pope in *Doctor Faustus*. Something which may have been viewed as heretical and un-Catholic of Marlowe as an author becomes more acceptable to the widely-Protestant audience who nod their heads in approval. The very nature of Puritanism soon morphed into the object of jokes made by other contemporary playwrights through the use of *ironic* allegory, in which the personified goody-goody philosophy that formed the "ideal Middle Age character" is still present but is now mocked by the other actors on the stage. As the artists saw the dynamic change in the religious and political climate of Renaissance England, they transitioned from their typical Passion plays to something a little closer to home for those Protestants in the front row.

Morgan Freeman Meets the Devil

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus may not seem the obvious candidate for examining a traditional redemption arc. It follows the obsession and total deterioration of the titular Doctor Faustus who, in desiring knowledge of life, the universe, and everything, sells his soul to Lucifer in exchange for the omniscience of God. Very quickly, the idle monotony of eternal power sucks the excitement out of what otherwise would be a godly station for a mortal, but which quickly becomes boring for the seminary-dropout.

There is of course the final culminating question of whether or not Faustus is genuinely redeemed despite getting dragged by demons and thrust into Hell. That certainly does not sound like a one-way ticket to total absolution, but that is exactly the point. Underrated playwright Christopher Marlowe often goes overshadowed by his frilly, *overrated* contemporary Shakespeare, but his ironic brilliance and technical competence shine in this five act play about the self-aggrandizing addiction to power that turns a man who had it all into a slave to Lucifer himself.

While typical juxtaposition of divine and satanic imagery is useful in expressing representative distinctions and boundaries between Good and Evil forces, Marlowe assigns both divine and satanic imagery *simultaneously* to a single character, staging a dualistic struggle between Faustus and his own psyche. Grippingly, this heightens audience investment in Faustus as a character in a suspenseful “Will-He-Won’t-He?” as Faustus becomes more aware of his “mentor’s” true nature, and where his poor legal decision might be leading him. A quick glance at a written outline for the play’s structure is an entire roundabout back to Aristotle’s *Poetics.* Reversals and discoveries tug at his mind and heart as he contemplates his path going forward, horrified by the possibility and uncertainty of Hell yet comforted by the little voice in his ear that

materializes riches and pleasures out of thin air. This whisper comes from none other than the demon henchman of Lucifer himself: Mephistophilis.

Intoxicated with resentment and under contractual service to the Lord of the Underworld, Mephistophilis is a weird melting pot of both sinful apathy and precautionary advice. He does Lucifer's bidding, that is for sure. His job is literally to collect reprobate souls who "[…] rack the name of God, abjure the Scriptures and his savior Christ" (Marlowe 1.3.47-48). At any point when Faustus is on the verge of repentance or negating Hell's existence, the demon intervenes and reminds him of the infinite pleasures of omnipotence, not mentioning the eternal burden that comes with having one's eyes opened by the Forbidden Fruit of the dark arts. Paradoxically, however, there are multiple instances in which Mephistophilis coughs a not-so-subtle insult under his breath as a critique of the Underworld, acting contrary to his nature as a servant to darkness. In fact, when the titular doctor consoles and reminds him that he has at least temporarily escaped from Hell, the bitter demon drops the now-popular response, "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it: Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God and tasted the eternal joys of heaven am not tormented with ten thousand hells in being depriv'd of everlasting bliss?" (Marlowe 1.3.77-81). Each of these character aspects of Mephistophilis shape him in the mind of the reader as painfully sympathetic; we do not want to feel for one of Satan's minions, but Marlowe's complex characterizations make us at least a tad more willing. Thematic conventions are disrupted when we see one fallen from Heaven, quite like ourselves in his backsliding, who yearns for the fulfillment of Heavenly promises.

This irony continues all the way to the Vatican scene, in which Faustus and his hellish companion harass the Pope and his anointed cardinals. Playing out like a *Monty Python* sketch, the two rabble rousers cast an invincibility spell that allows them to stay hidden from the Pope

and cardinals, whereby they are able to pull some wild shenanigans like eating the blessed meat, drinking the papal wine, and whacking the Pope across the face. Interpretations of this section range anywhere from an assessment of Marlowe's possible anti-Establishment, Protestant propaganda to Doctor Faustus and Mephistophilis just messing around. While these both seem like viable options in light of the work's larger role as a transitional piece from a time of excessive artistic censorship to a world where the filter was dropped, a hybrid might suit Marlow's intentions more accurately. The scene is at times humorous and serves well as a clever showcase for Faustus's abuse of his recently acquired godliness. On the other hand, the fear emitted by Mephistophilis at the first sign of a sung responsory speaks volumes; he is repulsed by the truly Holy, which overtly confirms the Pope's position as a true holder of sacred power within the context of the play. This creative decision reflects well on Marlowe, elevating himself as a companion to the papacy and winning commercial fame in the process. Furthermore, superstition plays a key role for both the demon and the Pope, reminding us of the human connection and solicitude that might be drawn between the Earthly and Infernal realm to the Celestial, though the Pope still seems to win the day in scaring the other two away.

Five acts deep, the play makes a dark descent to its final resolution: Faustus awaits his judgement in the Eleventh hour. As he reflects to himself, it is clear that he understands the gravity of the crime he has committed. With every strike of the clock nearing midnight, the hour of his judgement, he consumes himself in perpetual self-dread and loathing, imprisoned by his own refusal to accept the blood of Christ, of which "one drop would save [his] soul" (Marlowe, 778, line 80). He wants to call out for God, but with every attempt he is reminded that it was he who sold his soul to the devil, consciously damning himself but being too stupid to realize it. To repent is futile, he understands, but he echoes a plea to the Heavens asking for more time so that

he may rightfully repent: “Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven. That time may cease, and midnight never come! […] That Faustus may repent, and save his soul” (Marlowe 5.2.69-70). In the closing moments, he goes mad with sorrow as devils approach him and drag him down to Hell as per his agreement.

Riddled with moral contradictions and sophist jargon, Doctor Faustus’s ramblings throughout the play are a solid indication that he is just too far removed from God to be justified in any genuine way. In fact, he is a seemingly *irredeemable* fellow by the end of Act V. Vainglory and unbridled lust for omnipotence have consumed him, driving him to impersonate a cardinal, ridicule the Pope, and perform divination rituals. Call him a Droog for all intents and purposes. However, it is safe to say that in his final moments, Doctor Faustus is fully cognizant of his errors and wants so badly to receive the gifts of Christ’s atonement. A total shift from his earlier blasphemies and cursing, this final act of contrition shows off what he has come to learn: “Absolute power corrupts absolutely,” and to humble oneself before the Divine is no trivial thing. It can be said then that Faustus is “redeemed,” but not “justified.” In light of this, he must pay the price. Finally, a chorus enters in the Epilogue, reciting:

> “[…] Faustus is gone, regard his hellish fall,
> Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise
> Only to wonder at unlawful things” (Marlowe 6.1.4-6).

Perhaps in an effort to get around those pesky censorship laws, or maybe as a way to narratively legitimize what his audience just watched, Marlowe makes it clear that the story of Doctor Faustus is a precautionary tale, not one meant for emulation. In examining the doctor’s hubris and impiety, Marlowe promotes the comfortable Church-approved resolution that we ourselves ought to cling to the blood of Christ as the means to salvation. Narratively this is the

appropriate decision, as well as the most appeasing to church hierarchy who could have had him silenced for it. It is a loophole for conveying the fullness of sinful actions and their consequences by which the perpetrator is punished in the end. The audience requires a self-awareness to not be actively tone deaf to the underlying message of "*this is wrong*."

We notice how this structure differs from the aforementioned Subversive Redemption Arc. While the latter arrives at a (at the very least) morally ambivalent resolution to a spiritually exploitative problem, this more conventional story structure focuses on the key facets of the *Poetics* and Campbell's Monomyth. Nearly every egregious beat of the play is condemned either in tone, irony, or blatant rejection. The main character learns a world-altering truth by the finale and tries (but fails) to enact it for his own philosophical betterment. Again, neither structure is innately superior, but both are tempered to their own selective works and stylizations. Traditional Judeo-Christian themes appear heavily in *Doctor Faustus* in a way that, (while staying agnostic of religion), is undeniably a defining atmosphere around Marlowe's time and within the development of Western archetypes, myths, and redemption tales from their earliest conception. Overlap with films portraying the same struggles of *Doctor Faustus*, in particular the self-entrapment of one's own actions, the iffy redemption of antiheroes, and the hopelessness of Hell, are too numerable to count. One in particular, however, deserves more study than a lifetime can provide.

Hell is a prison in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Life sentences are a covenant between the self-convicted criminal and the cruel Mephistophelian overseer, Captain Hadley, who serves the corrupt and pseudo-religious Lucifer of Warden Norton.

Wrongfully convicted of a crime he had nothing to do with, Andy Dufresne is sentenced to serve two consecutive life sentences at Shawshank Penitentiary. Lawless and uncivilized, the

Shawshank life is not for the faint of heart. Andy soon finds himself surrounded by other convicted felons, ranging in severity from murderers to rapists, who make his prison term excruciatingly more miserable. On top of all that, each of the other inmates live in constant denial that they committed any crime whatsoever, excepting the example of the truthful but cunning Red who fesses up to the murder of his wife, but ultimately regrets his crime. Because of this, Red is exactly what he tells Andy he is: "[The] only guilty man in Shawshank" (Shawshank Redemption).

Red is a sly dog. He is crafty and is known around the prison yard as "the guy who can get things." Contraband of all kind is smuggled into the maximum-security prison at the snap of his fingers, which command his complex and close-knit network of those inside and out the criminal walls to haul in whatever his fellow inmates' hearts desire for a small retribution of some cigarettes. In effect, Red creates his own economy based on favors and camaraderie, which builds rapport between him and the other goons within the dehumanizing facility. Despite his irreparable homicide and shifty business dealings that only really violate the rules of the prison warden and not any higher Vertical Law, Red is one of the most authentic and respectable men at Shawshank.

Discussion of these details highlights the question at hand: If Andy is innocent and Red is remorseful, which character is implied in the title, *The Shawshank Redemption*? For our sakes, the answer seems to lay in another universal theme of the human condition: hope.

"There are places in this world that aren't made out of stone. That there's something inside…that they can't get to, that they can't touch. That's yours. […] Hope" (Shawshank Redemption) Andy says these words to Red after being beaten to a pulp by other inmates, subjected to two months of solitary confinement, sexually assaulted by a group of unpunished

rogues, and unprotected by the Warden or any of the authorities. Innocent and decent, Andy has been denigrated by the system and left behind by the devilish puppeteers who hold the strings. While claiming to be a called evangelist reflecting the light of Christ to his detainees, the Warden only cares about the moral conundrums that he witnesses, still choosing to handle matters with a baton beating over a missionary venture. His moral posturing is flimsy, and the abominable inmates themselves even mock him for his false façade and duplicity. Andy has every reason in the world to play the victim card, to harangue the system for its systemic injustice and instability; he has every reason to be an Arthur Fleck or Alex DeLarge (probably has more reasons than Alex). Yet he does not. Instead, he sends recurring letters to the state department, requesting grants be made to the prison for the improvement of their onsite library. Andy takes a new inmate under his wing and helps educate him so that the kid can receive a diploma to start a new life someday. He brings hope to Brooks, an elderly convict serving a fifty-year sentence, who is in deep need of clarity and tranquility when he is finally released but tragically cannot handle the outside world. He builds a strong fellowship with his peers, and an even deeper friendship with Red, with whom he shared, as Tolkien said, a passion and a road. Andy clings to hope and, in doing so, redeems the subject of the title: Shawshank Prison itself.

So, we see that a little leaven still leavens the whole loaf; but, keeping with the metaphor, a stronger spice taken with that leaven can make the loaf all the more scrumptious and filling. Sin is a catalyst for the occupants of Shawshank because of its dual utility in survival and luxury, as well as a counterfeit mental stability that anchors them to the little bit of self-determination they have left. Failing to delineate in all their unspeakableness and disgrace would lower the reverberating spirit of human depravity that makes the story compelling in the first place, effectively shrinking the evil flare that inhabits those who are supposed to be evil crooks. Seeing

the torment and assault inflicted on Andy make his rejection of this expected Shawshank lifestyle even more profound. Eventually escaping from the holdings of his cell by crawling through the muck and grime of Shawshank's sewers, Andy successfully makes it beyond the cement walls, his feces-stained body purified and reanimated by the cleansing rainfall of the natural world. Shawshank is behind him, but not the same Shawshank he entered two decades earlier; this is a redeemed Shawshank, one whose main sins lays concentrated in a shaken hierarchy whose nefarious indifference and maltreatment might just surpass the guilty objects of their persecution.

Justifying Evil: Finding Excuse in the Inexcusable

Almost undeniably, the Western archetype of redemption manifests itself centrally in the life of the Christ. Labeled by many (most notably in modern times by director George Stevens) as "The Greatest Story Ever Told," the story of the Messiah is a vivid and active display of the stages of the Hero's Journey that Joseph Campbell would later organize in his Monomyth structure of storytelling: Jesus of Nazareth is born in humble dwellings, accepts his call as the beloved prophet and Chosen Son of God, overcomes the trials and temptations around him by sticking to his heroic value system, endures the "longest night" in Gethsemane, atones with his Father, and finally takes the weight of the cross upon his back and is exalted as the *true* Redeemer, ascending into Heaven and taking his seat at the right hand of the Father.

By definition, this structure for a Redemption story necessarily means that the character in question is in *need* of redemption or, as Aristotle suggests, must remedy a great natural or socially-imposed flaw. What did Jesus do wrong? Why is it that we use a Redemptive structure of storytelling based on the *one* perfect Being to walk the Earth? For one thing, the Christ figure is both the Rule itself *and* the exception to the Rule. He personifies the ultimate quest of the human condition *while* subverting it. Jesus has no *need* for redemption, at least not as far as it

applies to himself. Instead he serves as a mediator, *our* means of redemption. If you nix him from the divine narrative, we remain fallen, grimy creatures.

One can immediately envision Andy Dufresne beautifying Shawshank Penitentiary. Making a one-to-one correspondence comparison between a jailbird Tim Robbins character and the literal Son of God may teeter on blasphemous, but the highlighted character trait of suffering for the sins of someone else is not by mistake or coincidence. Christ as a redeemer, and jointly Andy as an embodiment of that archetype, effectively justify the sins of their companions. To a much different degree, but keeping with the same argument flow, Faustus himself shakes before the divine, pleads for an escape route, but accepts the preordained conditions of his contract. While his covenant was written in Evil with the dark spirits of Hell, Christ's was written in love, transcending his worries to the Father and accepting His providential decree. Christ was exalted and perfected, thereby not succumbing to the fallibility of his pop culture counterparts, but his struggles and triumphing over Evil (or in Faustus's case, grasping Evil in his deathbed confessions) are universal templates for a character, fictional or not, to find redemption.

It might be fair to say that spiritually contextualized redemption arcs mimic the Christ path in the bulk of their divine design. What then can we say about our Subversive Redemption Arcs? Surely, in their contextual frame of subjective, dissipated morality, there is less of a connection to Plotinus's hierarchical Divine than have the traditional Hero Myths and value-studded conventional stories. Considering this, we must remind ourselves emphatically that this does not lower the quality of the former over the latter; they simply must be reexamined under a different criterion.

Scriptural accounts as written in the Hebrew Bible are as varying and wide-ranging as they are similar and overwhelmingly personal. Because of the premature eye-opening to original

sin incited by the Garden of Eden incident, the entire history of God's dealing with his chosen people and their fierce reluctance to resist his will and return to their vomit, is one of the most prominent recurring motifs in Scriptural cannon. Illustrating our infidelity in the most archaically accurate way possible, the authors of each book do not exactly pull punches to showcase the gravity of this fall from grace. Christian screenwriter Brian Godawa urges readers of the Word to be careful when justifying depictions of heinous sins on the grounds of "Would this be depicted in the Bible?", reminding readers of the moving accounts of shameless individuals who turned away from God in acts of "blasphemy, vulgar insults, sex orgies, gang rape, prostitution, adultery, incest, Peeping Toms, murder, being shot in the forehead, decapitation, disemboweling, […]" and a whole handful more (Godawa 436).Godawa points out the even more glaring example of hyper-visualized sexuality featured in the *Song of Solomon*, a marital allegory for Christ and his Church that clarifies properly executed eroticism. The Messiah himself recounted gruesomely close-to-home parables that demonstrated the harsh reality of the wages of our sins.

Emeritus professor of English Leland Ryken said of the displays of sin in Scripture, "As a religious book, the Bible does not escape from life. It uses the technique of realism to tell us something that we *need* to know, namely, the sinfulness of the human condition and the misery of a fallen world" (Godawa 437). Yahweh's guidance of the Hebrews through the desert was motivated not in want of gain or mammon--He is above that--but by pure arbitrary love precipitated grace upon His people which eventually comes to a head at Sinai when He presents Moses with codified laws for enacting a judicial system amongst the nomadic people. It is no wonder we share in Moses's (and even more so, God's) frustration when he returns to a bunch of idol-worshipping ingrates who could not wait five minutes to be relieved by a more instantly gratifying "god." What terrifies us is how willing the Hebrews are to reject the objective truths

they know to be true, instead making graven images and golden calves to worship. Cutting deeper is that innate understanding where we identify our own nature in these accounts.

But we must not chuck the Good Book across the room because of this. Squirming and writhing we must read on because of one crucial, game-changing, grief liberating point: Jesus. Gently, He comes in the synoptic Gospels as the Redeemer for *all* the murderers, slanderers, adulterers, and everyone in the pages preceding and proceeding far beyond the text itself. In most areas of hermeneutic study, He is the historical and sacred reason that Old Testamental accounts are prompted to be written. When Adam fell, we were damned; when Christ dies, we are saved. The Bible is not a nihilistic text meant to plunge readers into existential dread and to just accept "the way things are." It is a tangible reminder of our freedom from our fallen state, the natural flaw of our character that breeds consciously driven sin. Without Christ arriving in the Third Act, it would be game over for us; instead, He comes bearing *Via et Veritas et Vita*, a rainfall of blood to wash over us, cleanse us, and offer us a true escape from carnal limitations. Christ as Redeemer brings Hope.

Conclusion

Recontextualizing the Subversive Redemption Arcs in works like *A Clockwork Orange* and *Lysistrata*, as well as the gritty journeys of Andy Dufresne and Doctor Faustus, is not only unproductive and ignorant, but it is indeterminably dangerous. Losing the frame of metanarrative-like salvation spoils the fruit. We cannot watch and read these pieces of art in leisurely surface-level awareness; to do that is to deal a great injustice to both ourselves and the author's testimony in our hands. Muddying our understanding and application of the rules put forth by the artist, our senses fail us, and Plotinus's warning of staining our souls comes to pass. We must be keenly sharp and wary in digging into the works that require the most from us, or

else we will become incensed with disgust and feel a false need to clean up the depravity ourselves, playing the hypocrite as we often do. There is hope and value in what seems irredeemable. Greater moral tales can be told, often to greater effect and transformation. However, it is the subversively moral ones that require more time to sit with, to examine, to understand. We can acknowledge for a fleeting instant that there is some truth in the lie, and it is a lie we ought to respect, while not accepting it completely.

This thesis is not meant to be a call to reject accepted social conventions of storytelling. On the contrary, these conventions of storytelling deserve all the recognition in the world, as they are the inevitably appearing elements of any moral tale. A final admonition would be this: Next time you watch a film or read a book that contains profuse depictions of violence, sexuality, or other general vulgarity, ask yourself, “In viewing this, will I gain a greater apotheosis by the conclusion?” The ends may not justify the means (a discussion for another time), but the means might very well amplify what is *gained* by the end.

Works Cited

A Clockwork Orange. Dir. By Stanley Kubrick, Warner Bros., 1971.

"A Clockwork Orange." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, ed. 24 April 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Clockwork_Orange_(film). Accessed on 24 April 2021.

Aristotle. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 23,* translated by W.H. Fyfe, Harvard University Press, 1932.

Bevington, David, et al. "General Introduction." *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*. Norton & Company, 2002.

Godawa, Brian. "Redemption in the Movies." *The Christian Imagination*, edited by Leland Ryken, Revised & Expanded Edition. WaterBrook Press, 2002.

"The Shawshank Redemption – Finding Freedom in Beauty." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jack's Movie Reviews, 24 March 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3YLb5eMlRw. Accessed on 21 April 2021.

"Joker: Should Movies Teach Morality?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Just Write, 31 October 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MByrZYIxF4A. Accessed on 21 April 2021.

"Joker's Missing Character" *YouTube*, uploaded by Nando v Movies, 30 October 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEOyzKD5wqQ. Accessed on 21 April 2021.

St. John of Damascus. *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*. Translated by Andrew Louth, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003.

Kelly, Matthew. "Mostly Nitpicking." *Godzilla (2014)*, 9 March 2021, accessed on 24 April 2021.

Lannom, SC. “Martin Scorsese Directed Movies: Interviews and Quotes on his Filmmaking Techniques.” *Studiobinder*, 27 February 2020. https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/martin-scorsese-style-of-filmmaking/. Accessed on 24 April 2021.

Plotinus. “Ennead 1.6.” *On the Beautiful,* Translated by the Editors of the Shrine of Wisdom, The Shrine of Wisdom, 1955.

Plato. *The Republic*, 2nd ed., translated and edited by Allan Bloom. Basic Books, 1991.

Ryken, Leland. *Milton’s Paradise Lost.* Crossway, 2013.

The Shawshank Redemption. Dir. by Frank Darabont, Warner Bros., 1994.

Sidney, Philip. “The Defense of Poesy.” *Sidney’s ‘The Defence of Poesy’ and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, edited by Gavin Alexander. Penguin Books, 2004.

St. Theodore the Studite. *On the Holy Icons*, Translated by Catharine P. Roth. St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981.

Ward, Michael. “The Greatest Story Ever Told: Christianity and Film.” *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*, ed. Angus Menuge. Concordia Publishing House, 2011, pp. 201-217.