

## Memento: Fate vs. Destiny

What is inevitable, predetermined? We experience ourselves as agents of our own destiny, with choice and free will; yet we are pushed around around by forces internal and external, sometimes to the point that our experience seems fated. At the dawn of psychoanalytic theory, Freud identified the repetition compulsion, recognizing that our unconscious conflicts, remaining unresolved, may condemn us to repeating acts and choices that reflect our neuroses. In the timelessness of the unconscious, making the same mistakes again and again, never learning from conscious experience. What is **not** remembered influences us beyond the control of our conscious awareness.

*Memento* is the film that brought recognition to writer and director Christopher Nolan, preceding the more recent and well known *Inception* and the *Batman: Dark Knight* series. On the surface, the story is not extraordinary, particularly for the thriller genre. Leonard Shelby's wife was raped and murdered, and he injured, in a brutal home invasion. He is seeking revenge. However, the film stands out in telling the story in reverse, and with Leonard's injury of anterograde amnesia, in which short term memory cannot be laid down as long term memory. Nolan realized that telling the story this way is confusing, bringing the viewer into Leonard's perspective, forever unaware of what just preceded the current moment. To quote Nolan:

“We wanted this disorienting feeling of 'What if you look at the world in a different way, what if you experience something in a different way.' Because that's the whole point of the film, that's how the whole film works.”

I was drawn to analyze *Memento* because of the parallel to a psychoanalysis, where one begins with a symptom in the present, and one works backward, at times uncovering lost and repressed memory, to the original conflict or trauma, the reason for the symptom. In this film that first symptom is the slaying of Teddy; it is the end of the story, the present moment. But we have no sense of what led to the event. We see Leonard's destiny or fate, that he murders Teddy, but how did this come about? Was it inevitable, and if so, why? Or did Leonard have a choice? And even if he did have a choice, what were the factors that contributed to that choice?

The film is split into two narratives, a colour sequence and a black and white sequence. The colour sequence is the primary narrative, the outer world, so to speak, where the characters are interacting. These scenes are also close to Leonard's experience, mostly shot at his level, with him as the focus or shots over his shoulder and so on. The black and white sequences are different, with varied camera angles, extreme close ups, and voice-over narration as some of the other techniques that distinguish it from the main story. At the end of the film we learn that the black and white sequence is the time prior to the main story. However, I will try to make the case that it also can be viewed as a representation of Leonard's psyche, possibly even a dream.

The film begins with a scene actually occurring in reverse. At first, this is not apparent: a polaroid photograph, being shaken as it develops. But the image fades rather than getting more defined. We see the blood running, the way the scene is filmed such that we might not be aware it is reversed. Leonard

puts the picture back into the camera and the camera to his hip. But there is no denying the reverse when the gun flies to Leonard's hand, the glasses onto Teddy's face, and then the shot, the moment of murder, the presenting symptom. Immediately we, the viewers, are disoriented. Immediately there is the cut to the first black and white scene and the disorientation is echoed in Leonard's first words, "So where are you?". He notes being in some anonymous hotel room, perhaps a week, perhaps a month. I underline right away how this is a reflection of the unconscious, as we have learned from observation of the unconscious that it is timeless. There is no past, no future, only the eternity of the present moment.

I will add that our experience of disorientation in these first moments can be interpreted as a counter-transferential experience of Leonard, that what we feel in this moment, and other moments in the film, is what Leonard feels constantly. This disorientation is his reality, but a reality that must be denied. We truly know this reality because we feel it, not because Leonard readily admits it, and we can infer this reality to be mostly repressed.

It is much later in the film, in one of the black and white scenes, where Leonard actually voices the disturbed and usually repressed reality of his confusion. He states that you don't actually know anything, you don't know why you feel angry or guilty. You could do anything and not have the faintest idea ten minutes after. At another point in the film Leonard makes the link to time when he says, "How am I supposed to heal if I can't feel time?". This can certainly refer to the repressed unconscious, the nature of which we can see the effect, the symptom, but have no knowledge of what is behind it. Obviously we can have emotions with no grasp of their origin. And again there is the reference to the timelessness of the unconscious; though our conflicts formed and were repressed in a chronological past, the effect acts on us in the present moment.

Teddy brings voice to the other aspect of Leonard's confusion. At least twice in the film he states that Leonard does not know who he is, he only knows who he was. In the second colour scene, just before he is murdered, Teddy tells Leonard that if he goes into the basement, "then you'll know who you really are.". We now know that the basement contains the body of Jimmy Grants. Analytically interpreted, the basement is a reference to the unconscious. Leonard maintains a conscious identity of being his wife's avenger, justified in seeking revenge. But the actual identity, repressed in his unconscious, is a reality closer to, but not, a murderer, tied to Leonard's aggression, the destructive instinct, Thanatos, that is not contained. I shall return to the issue of Leonard's identity as an avenger later.

In the next scenes Leonard states, "You really do need a system if you're going to make it work.", essentially a declaration of the requirement for defenses that are required to keep repressed memory from consciousness. He explains that you need notes, but not too many; you learn to trust your own handwriting. You need a jacket with six pockets for particular things, and you learn to know where things go. You need to be wary of what other people write that doesn't make sense or will lead you astray. And if there is vital information, tattoo it on your body. He notes on the phone that you need to use habit and routine to make life possible. Leonard's explanation for his system is to be able to live with his condition, but as already noted, it does not truly help with the underlying confusion and disorientation that is always there. So too, the purpose of defenses may seem to make life easier, but the true purpose is to maintain repression.

As an aside, though relevant, are Leonard's tattoos. Primary is *John G. raped and murdered my wife and find him and kill him*. This is, of course, the revenge motive, the avenger identity. *She is gone* is the reference to his wife, but also to his devastation, the rationale for the revenge motive. Tattooed just beneath this is *Time still passes*, again a reference to the timelessness of the unconscious; yet Leonard is trapped in the moment of his wife's death. In a pyramid that is very reminiscent of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, are the following words: *photograph, house, car, friend, foe*, with the last as the apex of the pyramid. Another series of tattoos signals dangers – *Don't trust your weakness, Consider the source, and Memory is treachery*. And of course there are a list of "facts", servants of the revenge motive.

Leonard starts the story of Sammy Jenkis and his wife as a cautionary tale to illustrate the need for a system. Sammy didn't have a system. He did use notes but had way too many and could not keep organized. Leonard also states something more latent in Sammy's story, that Sammy had no drive; and here, again, he raises his own motivation, revenge. Leonard reveals he was an insurance investigator, Sammy his first big case. He remarks how in his work one can "let people talk and they reveal themselves". Of course this is a parallel to analytic process, but it is also what is occurring in much of the black and white scenes – Leonard is just talking and revealing himself.

The manifest content of Sammy's story is tragic. He sustained an injury with anterograde amnesia. Leonard, the investigator, thought he saw a look of recognition when he would meet with Sammy, using that as a basis for suspicion. Testing relied on a theory that Sammy should still be able to learn through operant conditioning, over time instinctually not touch the objects that would give him an electric shock. That Sammy did not meet the expectations was also used to support suspicion. Leonard repeats that he never said Sammy was faking, a declaration of his own guilt for not believing Sammy or bringing consolation to Sammy's wife. The insurance company turns down the Jenkis claim, leaving them with unmanageable medical bills. Sammy's wife becomes more distraught, though not because of the bills, but because she cannot understand. She sees her old Sammy, and the insurance company turning down the claim infects her with doubt so she becomes convinced that this is all in Sammy's head, and that he should be able to "snap out of it". She tries to gain understanding by visiting Leonard, but he cannot empathize with her need, and tells her what he thinks she wishes to hear. Leonard knows in his heart that Sammy suffers a serious problem, but feels bound to his employer and insists that Sammy is not suffering a physical condition. He behaves sympathetically, though motivated by his own shame; he insists the condition is mental, inferring that Sammy could "snap out of it".

With distraught hope, Sammy is given his "final exam" by his wife. As is stated, Sammy's wife knows that Sammy loves her, and she relies on this love to break through his amnesia. As is routine, she asks him to give her the insulin shot she requires, which he lovingly does. Resetting her watch, she asks again and again, each time hoping Sammy will remember what he has done just minutes before. But of course he does not, and she suffers an insulin overdose. Leonard recalls it as her trying to call Sammy's bluff, but he also recognizes her despair noting that maybe she didn't want to live with the things that she had put him through. So ends the morality tale of not having a system.

Yet we all have are systems, and in the world of the unconscious this means our defensive systems used to minimize anxiety related to our conflicts and other unconscious issues. These systems seem to

succeed as they maintain repression. However, these systems are vulnerable to failure, or may have significant costs in many aspects of our lives, affecting our relationships, our emotional state, and causing symptoms.

Leonard believes in his system as something that allows him to live, to manage life. However, from early points in the film we learn that Leonard's system does not work. In the third colour scene, Burt, the attendant at the hotel pretends not to know about Leonard so that Leonard starts to go on about his "condition", his well rehearsed story that explains to strangers why he behaves as he does. Burt, a kindly man in general, cannot keep up the pretence, and quickly admits he is messing with Leonard. Later in the film we learn that Burt, under instructions from his boss and because business is slow, has taken greater advantage of Leonard by renting him two rooms. Burt however is sympathetic. His motive for messing with Leonard is his fascination with the condition, "it's so weird". He is perplexed that Leonard cannot remember him from previous encounters. Burt does ask about Leonard's last memory – his wife - and then "what's it like?"; Leonard notes he is in a state where it's always just like waking up. Burt's response is empathic, "That must suck. It's all backwards.". He is close to Leonard's experience, and he begins to share his own experience. I find it compelling that Leonard does not want to engage with this empathy, talking over Burt with his own agenda. Leonard is focussed on his revenge, just earlier having written that he must kill Teddy. And with revenge in focus, there is no room to accept kindness from others.

The incident with Burt is relatively innocuous, we might disregard it as a failure of Leonard's system. It does not expose how vulnerable it is, how vulnerable Leonard is to others taking advantage of him. This is where the storyline around Natalie is very important.

We are introduced to Natalie early in the film, in the restaurant. Right away she is playing with Leonard as she lets him walk by as not recognizing her, before she grabs him. She is sarcastic and dismissive about his "little note", attacking Leonard and his system. The quips that if he mixes up his laundry list and grocery list he'll end up eating his underwear for breakfast. In their subsequent conversation, Natalie exposes the repression linked to the revenge, stating that Leonard will not remember the achievement. Leonard rationalizes that it does not matter if he remembers as his wife deserves it, his actions are not meaningless, a denial of the importance of the revenge motive in his life. The scene also evokes the love that Leonard has for his wife, now only in memory, where he can recall the details of what it is to be with someone so that you have the feel of the person. Natalie declares that they are both survivors, each having lost someone they love.

Moving forward in the film and backwards in time, the plot focusses on the Leonard's relationship to Natalie. We learn that they have slept together which seems to suggest a relationship based on warmth and caring. Natalie tenderly kisses Leonard declaring a belief that he will recognize her the next time they meet; we know he hasn't recognized her, which may explain her sarcastic tone later in time. Moving back in time, any idea of romance is quickly eroded as Leonard arrives at Natalie's, angry, wondering why he beat up Dodd. Natalie reacts to calm Leonard, stating he did her a favour for what Dodd did to her. But this is a lie. Leonard wants to listen to his instinctual knowledge that something is wrong while Natalie appeals to his "judgement", his system, which she knows is flawed.

There are a few scenes related to finding Dodd and eventually running him out of town, frequently

highlighting Leonard's confusion. Again waking in an anonymous hotel room, but differences like finding the gun. Lying in wait for Dodd but forgetting and taking a shower. Seeking out Dodd's hotel room but mixing up the rooms and attacking an innocent person. Chasing Dodd only to learn that he is being chased.

The truth behind Leonard's helping Natalie unfolds. Through Teddy we learn she has a connection to a drug dealer; while he is referring to Jimmy it's actually the whole drug underworld to which she is connected, including Dodd who wants Jimmy's money and drugs. Teddy implicates himself in his knowledge that Natalie is involved in drugs, but feels safe that she doesn't know who he is. Teddy knows Natalie will try to use Leonard and actually does try to protect Leonard, though also himself. He insists that Leonard write down not to trust her, though Leonard crosses that off based on the message on Teddy's photograph to not believe his lies.

Working backward we learn how Natalie has already manipulated Leonard to do her bidding. She is in trouble with Dodd. She takes all the writing utensils so that Leonard cannot write himself a note, undermining his system. She then attacks him verbally at the level of his condition, agitating him by telling the truth of how she can say anything to him and he will not remember. She then incites him to hit her by goading him at the source of his pain, his wife, tearing at his idealizations of his wife in calling her a whore with venereal disease and as the cause for the memory loss; this unleashes Leonard's aggression. The manipulation is final once she leaves, waiting for enough time for Leonard to forget, then returning and blaming Dodd for her injuries, appealing to Leonard's sympathy.

Natalie's manipulation of Leonard and his "system" is quickly followed by the yet more sinister actions in the same vein by Teddy. Teddy's relationship to Leonard is complex. He likes Leonard and has sympathy for his condition; this is explicitly noted in Nolan's interview about the writing of the story, and I feel is reflected in the acting by Joe Pantoliano. However, Teddy is also a criminal, potentially a drug dealer, maybe a snitch, possibly a crooked policeman – and one can certainly consider that he may be a combination of all of these. Teddy has his own nefarious interests in the foreground. He wants the drug money Leonard has forgotten is in the trunk of Jimmy's car, and he seems to have a personal interest in being rid of Jimmy, running Dodd out of town, and keeping his role hidden from Natalie. But he does not just steal the money, which he could easily do, and instead seems to want Leonard to give it to him, even unwittingly, by asking Leonard to allow him to drive the car, or to switch cars.

Approaching the climax of the film is Teddy's manipulation of Leonard and his system in the events leading to Jimmy's murder. In the only black and white scene in which Teddy appears, thus prior to the murder, Teddy makes sure Leonard does not take a photograph of him in a way that can be linked to the Discount Inn, also insisting Leonard not identify him as a police officer. He knows Leonard will kill Jimmy, stating "Make him beg.". Leonard acts out his "revenge", the memories of his wife symbolic of his motive, shot in colour, just preceding the actual act. But Jimmy's last whispered words, "Sammy Jenkins", throws Leonard into doubt and he instinctually knows something is not right. This is sustained through the arrival of Teddy and Leonard uses the doubt to confront him about being used. Teddy only half-heartedly denies this which I believe is less a denial of the facts, and more the denial of his selfish motives. He rationalizes using his care for Leonard's plight, "So you lie to yourself to be happy. There's nothing

wrong with that. We all do it. Who cares if there a few little details you'd rather not remember?". He reveals that the actual revenge happened long previously, but that Leonard forgot; he shows the photograph of Leonard pointing at his heart, noting how happy he was, and he wanted to see him that happy again.

Teddy also exposes the greater truth of why Leonard is vulnerable, because he only remembers what he wants to. He explains how it was Leonard who blacked out the lines in the police file creating a puzzle that can never be solved. He inadvertently and fatally sets himself up as a target when he points out his own name fits the profile Leonard has created. Teddy accuses Leonard of reworking Sammy's story to cover the fact of his own plight, stating Sammy was a fraud with no wife, and that it was Leonard's wife who had diabetes, presumably giving Leonard the "final exam" that led to her death, rather than the home invasion as the cause.

Ultimately Leonard is vulnerable to manipulation, his system faulty, because of his desire for revenge, and Teddy voices this: "You live in a dream, kid. A dead wife to pine for, a sense of purpose to your life, a romantic quest you wouldn't end even if I weren't in the picture.". Leonard needs revenge, not to kill, but to live. Leonard rationalizes his need for vengeance as a duty to his wife, but as I stated previously, being an avenger is his identity, who he is, not who he was. He is not a killer, which Teddy notes is why he is so good at it; it is not the action of killing, rather it is his state of being his wife's avenger.

In the dramatic conclusion we see how Leonard's system is most vulnerable to himself. It is a moment of insight, if you will, where he sees his need for the avenger identity and manipulates himself. He writes on Teddy's photo to not believe his lies, he burns the photograph of his latest victory, and he sets up to tattoo Teddy's license plate as his sixth clue. He thinks to himself how he will choose Teddy to be his next John G., his next puzzle, so that he can be happy. In the final soliloquy he underlines the relationship of his revenge motive to living:

"I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed the world's still there. Do I believe the world's still there? ... Yah. We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I'm no different."

Leonard's memory was destroyed in the home invasion, and without his ability to remember, essentially he is not functional in living. He no longer has his wife to help him; yes, on a practical level, but more importantly she is no longer available to him as a love object. Yet, he remembers his love, and ultimately feels the tremendous grief in his loss. He cannot accept this, which would have been the healthiest response so that he could move on. In an effort to avoid his loss he must become an avenger of his wife's death. He transforms the conflict into his identity and he is no longer the man he was. The world he wants to be out there is the world where he still has purpose so does not have to lose the meaning that his love for his wife provided. In life, his wife, their relationship, had been the mirror that reminds him of who he is. In death he cannot sustain that, so under the guise of love he uses a mirror within him, one that reflects the image he wants.

I have declared that the revenge motive, the avenger identity, is a defense against the despair of the loss of Leonard's wife and the life he lived, a defense against the truth of his incapacity. However, we must also consider that it protects him from guilt. There is certainly the suggestion of guilt when Leonard

reviews his conversation with Mrs. Jenkis, telling her what she wants to hear, he thinks, but actually solidifying her despair rather than helping her accept the situation. Teddy declares that Sammy Jenkis' story is actually Leonard's own story, that Leonard's wife had diabetes and put Leonard through the "final exam", that he was responsible for her death, at least in part, and not the assault during the home invasion. Here I wish to present to you what I consider a moment of film genius – but it was truly momentary and likely missed.

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I do not insist that this moment means that Teddy is speaking the truth. Teddy does lie for his own purposes, and when he is making the accusation he wants Leonard to get out of town, and wants the money and drugs in the trunk of Jimmy's car. That said, the actual truth is irrelevant. I believe this moment in the film is a declaration of Leonard's guilt at his impotence in being able to protect his wife, if not from a couple of assailants, then from himself and his injury. The identity of an avenger is that of a potent and capable man, strong and noble. Leonard's reality is that he barely functions, only moment to moment, that he is weak and susceptible to the manipulations of others who use him for their own needs.

I also declared at the beginning that the black and white scenes can be viewed as Leonard's internal world, maybe even a dream. This is my analytic interpretation. I do not state this as Nolan's intent as concretely it is the time period that leads to the beginning of the story told in the colour sequences, the transition another point of the fine art in this film. There are elements that evoke dreaming. Consider the different perspectives compared to the reality of the colour sequences. There is the disembodied other on the phone. There is the tale of Sammy Jenkis, which could be seen as the day's residue, an element that contributes to dreams.

A very important lesson learned from the analysis of dreams is that defensive functioning in the dream operates differently than the defenses used in waking life. An example is that of displacement, where aspects of ourselves can be represented in images – things or people – outside of ourselves, different from the waking projection of our feelings or thoughts into others that can be a defense in waking life. The Sammy Jenkis story is a displacement as that moment of the film suggests, that when Leonard is recounting the tragedy of Sammy, he is actually telling of his own tragedy. In this inner world representation Leonard is much closer to the real feelings he experiences, the frustration in not knowing what has happened, why he may feel as he does; the frustration in not being taken seriously by others such as the police (as opposed to the colour sequences where he forgets the prank played on him in the bar, or shrugs off Burt's playing dumb). And finally there is the anxiety that he cannot trust himself.

With my last words I'd like to return to the idea of fate or destiny. These terms evoke that question as to whether we are in charge of our lives or subject to the fates, something outside of ourselves. Analytic knowledge complicates that question because of the nature of the unconscious. The origins of our unconscious conflicts come from the interaction of our drives with external relationships so already in question is how much are we subject to external forces? And yet these conflicts are within us, are part of us, thus are part of us being masters of our own fate. Then, complicating things yet more, because these conflicts and the influence they have are mostly unconscious, how much are actually our own masters?

I feel *Memento* highlights these questions in an artfully told story. Leonard is a victim of what he

cannot remember, and we may assume from the many relationships in the film that he is fated to be used in the manipulations of those in his life. But ultimately all events in the film have resulted from a choice Leonard made in a moment, a choice that would be forgotten, the ultimate manipulation of himself.

Thank you.