

The Adaptation of *Memento*

At first glance, the film *Memento* is simply a loose expansion of the short story “Memento Mori”. However, upon further analysis, we discover a complex weave of intertextual references and careful choices made to produce a new, independent work.

"Memento Mori"

The short story by Jonathan Nolan is about a man named Earl in a mental institution. Earl cannot make new memories, and so he leaves a number of notes and pictures taped around his room to remind himself of things--to brush his teeth, that he went to his wife's funeral, the nature of his brain damage.

The scenes of Earl coping with daily life are interspersed with sections of text in italics—long notes (about a page each) from Earl to himself. In these notes, Earl philosophically explains to himself what his condition means—how he can never lead a normal life, how he can never get over his wife's rape and murder because the memory is always so fresh, and how he has nothing to lose in seeking revenge for his wife. As the story progresses, these notes become more motivational and congratulatory as Earl pursues his wife's killer.

Between the notes, the story contains five brief scenes of Earl's life: waking up in a mental institution and trying to get through the process of brushing his teeth; waking up fully clothed in bed and then reading the note on the ceiling telling him he must escape the institution; opening his eyes to find himself getting a tattoo; waking up in a hotel room and examining all his tattooed facts and instructions, including a sketch of a man's face; looking out a car window at a dead man on the sidewalk with a face matching his tattoo, then finding that he is handcuffed and can't find a pen as the

car pulls away from the scene.

Memento

The film, directed by Chris Nolan, follows a man named Leonard. Leonard cannot make new memories since the attack on him and his wife. He is seeking revenge for the death of his wife, trying to find a man named "John G." Leonard keeps very brief notes on scraps of paper, Polaroid pictures, and as tattoos; he has conditioned himself to check his pockets for notes on what to do next. However, Leonard is manipulated by a number of other characters in the story—Teddy, a rogue cop; Natalie, a bartender and drug-dealer's girlfriend; and even Burt, the motel clerk who checks Leonard into two rooms at the same time.

The most noteworthy aspect of the film, however, is that it is composed of a number of color sequences in reverse chronology. The beginning of the film shows Leonard shooting Teddy in an abandoned building. The next color scene shows Leonard meeting Teddy at the motel, driving out to the building, and threatening Teddy with a gun. Because of this sequencing, we know nothing more about what came before this moment than Leonard does, and, like him, we must go only on the clues provided by his notes and pictures.

In between each color scene is a black and white scene of Leonard in his motel room. These scenes involve either a voice-over or, more often, are simply of Leonard talking on the phone to someone, explaining life with his condition. He also explains about Sammy Jankins, a man he knew before the attack who had the same problem.

The Adaptation

There are many story elements in common between the short story and the film. Both revolve around a man who has lost the ability to make new long-term memories after he was attacked by his wife's murderer. In both, this man is attempting to track down this murderer, keeping himself on track

through the use of temporary paper notes and permanent tattoos.

But aside from this basic premise, we find that the two works widely differ. Using Desmond and Hawkes' (2006) "Method for Studying Film Adaptation" as a starting point, we can structure our analysis around a number of different aspects.

Characters

In "Memento Mori", the protagonist is named Earl. He is the only character developed in the story, and, even then, we don't learn that much about him. Doctors are mentioned, but never shown. The story does describe a tattoo artist and the crowd gathering around the body of a man on the sidewalk. But these characters are all tangential to the story.

In *Memento*, the protagonist is named Leonard. We learn much about his past, complete with flashbacks—his job as an insurance investigator; his relationship with his wife; his investigation of Sammy Jankins, who had a very similar memory condition. Additionally, the film adds a number of other characters already mentioned above—Teddy, Natalie, Burt—who play essential roles in the development of the story. Other new characters include the escort Leonard hires; Natalie's boyfriend, Jimmy Grantz, whom Leonard kills; Dodd, a drug-dealer that Leonard roughs up for Natalie.

Setting

"Memento Mori" begins in a mental institution, passes through an anonymous motel room and tattoo parlor, and ends in the back of a police car.

Memento never explicitly mentions whether Leonard has been in a mental institution (though certain ambiguous clues indicate that perhaps he has). It also passes through motel rooms and tattoo parlors, but it adds other locations, such as Natalie's house, the bar where she works, a diner, and the abandoned building where Leonard kills both Jimmy and Teddy.

Narration

"Memento Mori" uses third person limited narration to describe Earl's actions. Though we focus on Earl's actions, we are not privy to his consciousness. However, the italicized letters Earl writes to himself are in first and second person—"I don't know where you'll be when you read this" (Desmond 2006, p.145) and "You can't have a normal life anymore" (p. 140).

Memento follows this same narration style. The color sequences follow Leonard closely, but we do not get a voice-over during any of the color scenes. It is a third person narration, with Leonard as our filter. (We do get rare glimpses into Leonard's consciousness, however—his memories of his wife's life and death, consideration of whether she may have had diabetes, and a fantasy vision of having succeeded in finding her killer.) We do get a first person voice-over during the first couple black and white scenes, often describing in second-person terms how "you" deal with such a condition—"You really need a system if you're going to make it work."

Plot

Both the story and the film culminate in a revenge killing by the protagonist. But *Memento* is much more complicated, as many other characters attempt to manipulate Leonard along the way. It involves a detailed subplot about Leonard's relationship with Natalie, and how she manipulates him into dealing with Dodd for her. It also involves a sequence in which Leonard hires an escort and burns his wife's possessions in an attempt to condition himself that his wife is dead. It is important to note that, while the film has the same premise as the story, *none* of the scenes of the story occur in the film in their original form. Leonard does get a tattoo in a parlor and does kill a man he believes to be his wife's murderer, but the details of these events are quite different from those of Earl's experience. Unlike Earl, Leonard is not captured at the end of the film.

Style

The film adapts Leonard's note system to be more visual. It adds the use of Polaroids, with

names and short notes scribbled on the white footers. Leonard also has a few short notes on paper, but these are nothing like the page-long letters of Earl's. Leonard's notes tend to be more terse and functional, while Earl's tend to be contemplative and motivational.

The film also employs a number of film noir elements, which we explore in more detail below.

Theme

While both the story and the film concern themselves with memory and how it affects all of us, they do so in different ways. The short story focuses on how we are all different people at different moments. One of Earl's letters sums this up:

Here's the truth: People, even regular people, are never just any one person with one set of attributes... The angry man hands the baton to the sulking man, and in turn to the sex addict, the introvert, the conversationalist. Every man is a mob, a chain gang of idiots. This is the tragedy of life. Because for a few minutes of every day, every man becomes a genius. Moments of clarity, insight, whatever you want to call them.... But then the genius, the savant, has to hand over the controls to the next guy down the pike, most likely the guy who just wants to eat potato chips, and insight and brilliance and salvation are all entrusted to a moron or a hedonist or a narcoleptic. (Desmond 2006, p.142)

Without memory, and so without a sense of time, Earl's identity is even more fragmented than a normal person's. Earl must struggle to control the "idiots" he becomes between successive moments of insight through the use of notes and letters to himself.

In *Memento*, on the other hand, Leonard's personality and proactive pursuit of his goal is relatively consistent. He is still affected by emotion; in particular, during periods of stress, he is less able to retain focus on the task at hand and remember what he is doing. But, unlike Earl, he tends to shift quickly and easily between the roles of "note-taker" and "note-follower".

Primarily, *Memento* raises questions concerning the accuracy of memory. As Leonard tells Teddy over lunch, memory is unreliable. Memory can change small details; eye-witness testimony is not trustworthy. Instead, Leonard claims, he follows facts—photographs and established details that he has written down. As the story unfolds, however, we learn that many of Leonard's recorded "facts" have been manipulated by both himself and others. And, at the end of the film, Teddy raises the

question of whether Leonard has been deceiving himself.

To a lesser extent, the film does also remind us of the importance of time on our identities. Leonard is constantly haunted by the immediacy of his wife's death because he remembers her dying but cannot experience the time it takes to heal from the grief of her passing. Teddy reminds him a couple times that he does not know who his is—he knows who he was, but not who he has become. Without memory, Leonard's actions have no consequence for him. Even though he has performed at least two murders before killing Teddy, he is unable to feel any moral impact from his deeds (Klein 2001).

The Nature of Adaptation

Based on the above, I think we can agree with Desmond and Hawkes (2006) that the adaptation of *Memento* is a "point of departure" adaptation. That is, the film takes only the short story's premise—a man with a memory impairment pursues his wife's murderer through the use of notes and tattoos—but drops the majority of the narrative elements. As we've seen, it has kept much of the same narration style, but has greatly changed the events of the story, added a number of new characters, explored new settings, expanded the style, and even modified the theme.

This would seem to imply an "unfaithful" modification of the original. However, as Desmond and Hawkes argue, an absolutely "faithful" adaptation is not possible between two different media. Literature is a one-track medium, invoking "unfixed" images—that is, many specific details are supplied by the reader. On the other hand, film is a five-track medium of fixed, specific images and sounds. Invariably, this fixed experience does not exactly mirror that invoked by the literary source material. Therefore, we cannot view an adaptation as a literal transposing, but should instead consider it as a kind of translation. Stam (2000) also defends this translation model of adaptation, defining such translation as a "principled effort of intersemiotic transposition with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation" (p.62).

Yet even a casual "translation" of "Memento Mori" would not produce the expanded *Memento*. This is partly because any adaptation of a short story to a feature-length film will require additional material to bring it up to the required running time (Desmond 2006). But perhaps we should also take a more inclusive view of adaptation. In addition to exploring adaptation as translation, Stam (2000) promotes the notion of "intertextual dialogism", which "suggests that every text forms an intersection of textual surfaces" (p.64). That is, each work is a separate entity, but may "translate" or "read" or "signify" another text.

Leitch (2003) furthers this stance by questioning whether we can really say adapted works are less "original" than their source. He points out that many revered and respected works—from such authors and auteurs as Shakespeare, Kubrick, and Disney—are based on earlier material, yet remain distinctly their own, unique works. Additionally, works in any media rely on the collective conventions established by their preceding works. Leitch points out that we are rarely adapting only a single text at a time, and even source texts are themselves intertexts. This intertextuality in *Memento* is most apparent when we consider its film noir elements.

Intertextual Considerations

Stam, in support of his intertextual stance, relies on the Gerard Genette's concepts of transtextuality. One type of transtextuality is hypertextuality, wherein a hypertext "transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends" a hypotext (Stam 2000, p.66). Here we may think of "Memento Mori" as the hypotext; *Memento* as the hypertext.

However, in an interview on the DVD, Chris Nolan reveals an interesting fact: the short story was not completed until well after filming of the movie had started. His brother Jonathan explained the idea to him on a cross-country roadtrip and granted him permission to extend it into a film. Here we see that "Memento Mori" is not the primary, hypotext we have been assuming. Instead, both the short story and the film are different readings or interpretations of Jonathan Nolan's original idea, as

explained during that car ride.

To further confound the issue, we should examine the website constructed to promote the movie before it was released. Named "Otnemem", it was designed by Jonathan Nolan. The site presents a number of Polaroids and sounds from the film, torn pages from police and psychiatric reports, as well a number of notes from Leonard to himself. The center of these different puzzle pieces is a newspaper clipping about the attack on Leonard and his wife.

This site blurs the boundaries between the film and the story. It reveals that Leonard has escaped from a mental institution (as Earl did). The style of the notes is longer and more motivational, as Earl's notes are. It also provides evidence that can clarify or confound conclusions formed in the movie. For instance, a doctor's report claims that Leonard began obsessing about a "John G." while still in the hospital, raising questions about whether "John G." is only a groundless construction of Leonard's. It also reports that Leonard's wife was "unresponsive" at the scene, further highlighting the question of whether she actually died as Leonard believes.

"Otnemem" can be seen as a "paratext" of the movie—a collection of "accessory messages and commentaries that come to surround the text and at times become virtually indistinguishable from it" (Stam 2000, p.65). (We should note here that both the website and the short story appear on the DVD, albeit in slightly different technical formats than their originals.) But, for those people who may have explored the site but never read the story or saw the film, the website functions as its own, stand-alone text. So, between these three works, we see that there does not exist a simple, unidirectional relationship of source to adaptation.

Film Noir Influences

As an example of adapting multiple texts, *Memento* also pulls strongly from the film noir tradition, which the short story does not. Chris Nolan mentions in the DVD interview that he intended this. Film noir staples invoked by the film include the use of voice-over and revealing flashbacks

(Telotte 1989, Spicer 2002). It taps into themes of paranoid alienation, as Leonard does not know who he can trust. It reveals a society of corruption, as nearly every other character is involved in drug deals or other “seedy” endeavors in some way, and most are trying to manipulate Leonard to their own benefit. Leonard is a sort of classic noir protagonist: a damaged man seeking revenge; yet, at the same time, a victim himself. His old job was that of an insurance investigator, which he claims gives him an edge in his new task as something of a (private) detective. Natalie proves a classic femme fatale—a desirable but duplicitous and dangerous woman. Amnesia itself is a staple of film noir (Spicer 2002).

As Spicer describes:

Postmodern film noir's excess is also evident in its highly complex narratives where the convoluted plots often circle back on themselves, and by a pervasive uncertainty about the reliability of what is being shown or told. A flashback structure is common, but, as John Orr notes, postmodern flashbacks are more visceral, oblique and ambiguous than their classical predecessors (p. 158).

Though linear and complete when reconstructed, *Memento's* narrative certainly feels complex and circular on the first viewing as each segment brings us back to what we already know. And questions of reliability and ambiguity are rife through *Memento*.

Ambiguity

One of Leonard's tattoos states "Memory is treachery." This tattoo ties together the movie's central theme of the unreliability of memory with the ambiguity common to its film noir roots. The pivotal question, raised by Teddy at the end of the film, is whether Leonard is actually Sammy Jankins. This would mean that his wife was not killed by an intruder, but by Leonard himself in the same way he relates that Sammy Jankins killed his: by accidentally overdosing her on insulin. When Teddy tells him this, Leonard pauses, and we see two flashback/recollections of Leonard's: one in which he pinches his wife and another where he gives her an insulin shot. Leonard then shakes his head and affirms that his wife did not have diabetes. But is Leonard reliable?

Debate rages (Klien 2001, Lundegaard 2001), but there is evidence in favor of what Teddy

claims. How else could Leonard know the details of how Sammy killed his wife? Teddy posits that it was Leonard himself who censored his copy of the police report and established the "John G." puzzle. Leonard is brain-damaged, and not the most reliable source of information. The tattoo "Remember Sammy Jankins" is in cursive, which throughout the film is a sign of false leads—such as Natalie's cursive writing on the drink coaster and how Leonard cursively writes "don't trust her" on the back of Natalie's picture only to placate Teddy. When we see Sammy in flashback in the mental ward, there is a fraction of a second at the end of the scene when Sammy becomes Leonard. While sitting at Natalie's, Leonard has a (color) flashback of preparing an insulin shot, which occurs without any prompting from outside sources. As Teddy claims, we all lie to ourselves to give ourselves a sense of purpose. And indeed, Leonard does choose to lie to himself at the end of the film, setting himself up to kill Teddy. Extreme theories even suggest that Leonard killed his wife intentionally (he mentions how much certain things she did annoyed him; and that she was very well insured, providing the money he has now); and that his own condition is perhaps only psychological (perhaps motivated by guilt), as he once claimed Sammy's was.

In favor of Leonard's reliability, we should recognize that Teddy lies nearly every time he opens his mouth. He claims he doesn't know Natalie when helping Leonard with Dodd, but we learn later that he does know her. He tells Leonard about a "bad cop" that has been harassing and manipulating Leonard, when it is really Teddy who is this "bad cop." He says Jimmy Grantz deals out the Discount Inn, but at another point says he deals out of Natalie's bar. How could Leonard remember the details of Sammy's life if he really is a memory-impaired Sammy? Scenes of Sammy becoming Leonard can be seen simply as acts of projection or identification on Leonard's part. Similarly, he envisions giving his wife an insulin shot only to test the idea's validity; and his visions of lying with his wife after having found her murderer are only fantasy. Not all of Leonard's mental imagery is intended to be memory.

Other factors confound the debate, making it obvious the ambiguity is constructed, with the intention of asking us to question our own memories. Teddy's license plate, as actually seen on his car,

subtly transforms through the film from "SG13 UI7" to "SG13U17", where the second-to-last character changes from the letter I to the number 1. This was intended, and is part of the script (Duncker 2004). On the Limited Edition DVD, there are different, parallel commentaries by Chris Nolan, one of which claims Teddy is lying while another claims he isn't (Duncker 2004).

Conclusion

Thus we see that the adaptation of *Memento* is not a simple translation of the short story. Instead, the story and the film are both expansions of a common idea put forth by Jonathan Nolan; were there notes of this car-ride discussion, they would be the real hypotext of the two works. The website provides further complexity as an intertextual reading of the story, the film, and the original idea. The film is also referencing certain conventions of film, particularly those of film noir. In the interest of heightening its theme of the memory's unreliability and its affect on identity, the film hasI constructed a very tangled web of ambiguity and alternative interpretations. In this way, the film emerges as a work with its own flavor and a greater depth than the story on which it is ostensibly based.

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