



ISSUE # 5 | JULY 2024

Double Jeopardy: *Memento*'s Trying Narrative

Maryn Davenport

The progress narrative is one of the oldest in storytelling. This type of narrative is linear: a character begins their story at point A and ends up somewhere further down that line at point B. That character is often the protagonist, whose comprehension of the story serves as a proxy for ours. Time passes between these two points chronologically, suggesting a cause-and-effect relationship between events and lending the ending a satisfying sense of closure. By consuming the same pattern of stories over and over, we get lulled into a sense of security, enjoying the effort it takes to make sense of what we see precisely because we trust that our destination will offer a reward for the journey. Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) warps the progress narrative dramatically. While the story does have a beginning and an end, the plotting is complicated: one part of the film is shot in color and proceeds in reverse chronological order; the other, interwoven with the first in equal segments, is in black and white and moves forward through time. As has been widely discussed, this device encourages audience empathy with our amnesiac lead, Leonard Shelby, as well as sympathy for his revenge narrative. Although the two timelines do connect in the film's final sequence, the events that transpire there mark neither the beginning nor the end of Leonard's story. Instead, the sequence finally and fully reveals the implications of Leonard's memory loss and the fact that it makes a progress narrative impossible for him. At this point, the very tools Nolan uses to establish our sympathy with Leonard urge us instead to reject him as an interpretive guide. If we don't, we allow ourselves, like Leonard, to selfishly choose the comfort of a closed narrative rather than make the difficult decision to accept an unending one.

Beyond folding in the chronology of the story, Nolan wields other techniques and tropes to corrupt the closure we might seek in the final sequence. Color is among the most significant. Monochrome and color both register to the viewers as "truth" in the narrative. In monochrome, the viewers witness events that Leonard has long forgotten about, and the events shot in color are memories that he's actively losing. Since the protagonist's memory is impaired, the viewers must take it upon themselves to thread the narrative across these dual segments. However, when monochrome and color finally connect at the film's end, this editing technique reveals to the viewers that both truths are artificial. The final sequence of the film begins in monochrome, but after Leonard kills Jimmy and takes his photograph, it bleeds back into color. At first glance, this shift seems to play



into the viewer's narrative expectations, since we anticipate that the two timelines will merge at some point to finally reveal the chronological relationship between the story's events. Therefore, this long-awaited transition leads the viewer to expect closure of both Leonard's narrative and our own. But the stunning events in the sequence disrupt these expectations. Leonard's narrative can never move forward since he has no concept of time. The transition into color symbolizes this conflict, because although the transition occurs at the end of the *film*, it occurs in the middle of Leonard's *story*. Since Leonard is incapable of moving forward and finding fulfillment, he constantly creates a

mystery to solve in order to give meaning to his existence. As we watch him do so again, we are left only with very different questions than those that had propelled us through the story to this point.

One critical element of the sequence's mise-en-scene is its setting: an abandoned building. The significance of this building is that it's the site of Jimmy's death at the end of the film, but it's also the site of Teddy's murder at the beginning of the film. The repetitive setting emphasizes that Leonard's narrative is not a progressive one. Rather than moving forward on a linear path, he is blindly running in circles, stuck in an endless loop of pursuing justice but never achieving closure after he kills his target. The building is isolated and anonymous, serving as a metaphor for the repetitions of Leonard's trauma; it is the place where he learns the truth about having killed his wife, but then represses it and carries on with murdering his various John Gs. Furthermore, the building itself disrupts Leonard's desire for



closure by refusing to offer any signals of redemption. This type of narrative often culminates in a final showdown between hero and villain in a spectacular location, with dramatic lighting, exceptional detail, and impressive scope. But the abandoned building does not adhere to such expectations. Instead of grand, bright, and clean, the building is old, hollow, and dirty. After Leonard's (present) victory, he drags Jimmy's body into an unfinished basement. There is no sense of triumph in a setting with such a grim tone and dark coloration, and progress is usually imagined as an upward rather than downward movement. These effects further undermine Leonard's belief that his quest for revenge is noble.

The music in the sequence also disrupts the viewer's expectations of a progress narrative. When a protagonist finally defeats an antagonist, the music tends to be thrilling and inspiring, but this sequence distinctly lacks any such grandiosity. When Teddy confesses to Leonard that Sammy Jankis's story is really Leonard's own, the music begins as faintly as an echo, stirring tension in the

viewer. The music stops, then starts up again when Teddy reveals that Leonard already killed the man who had assaulted him and his wife. This time it grows louder and more sorrowful as an ominous pulsing rises, replicating the sudden and horrifying effect of Teddy's words for Leonard and the viewer. In the final shots of the sequence, when Leonard monologues about needing to believe his actions still have meaning even if he can't remember them, the music continues to reflect his emotions. It sounds melancholy, yet driven, reflecting how Leonard is upset by Teddy's confessions but refuses to give up the meaning that his search for John G.—*any* John G.—has given his existence. Leonard can no longer be characterized as a hero after he decides to forget what Teddy tells him. The music also doesn't align with the viewer's expectations for a character who has grown and healed from their trauma, because its tone is tense and woeful.

On the surface, *Memento* attempts to replicate an experience for the viewer that is similar to Leonard's memory loss by experimenting with the passage of time, but by rejecting the chronological construction of the progress narrative, it creates disruptions on a deeper level. *Memento* is a disturbing film in that it deliberately disturbs the standards that it knows the audience subconsciously holds for it. It challenges the viewer, like Leonard, to glean their own meaning from the story when the path it takes isn't a straight line but no path at all. Christopher Nolan's film rips away the viewer's comfort blanket with the best of intentions, unraveling the progress they have actually projected in the process of looking for it. ☹

Maryn Davenport is a Professional Writing and Publishing major at UW-Whitewater with minors in Film Studies and Creative Writing. This essay was written for a Text and Image course in Spring 2023.

Nolan, Christopher, director. *Memento*. Newmarket Films, 2000. DVD.