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The Tree of Life and Courageous: Comparative Analysis on Faith-Based Filmmaking

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The Tree of Life and *Courageous*: Comparative Analysis on Faith-Based Filmmaking

A Thesis Presented to
the Faculty of School of Communication Arts of
Asbury University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Sean O'Connor

December 11, 2015

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This thesis has been approved
for the School of Communication Arts

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the story structure of two films, *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *Courageous* (2011), and their similarities and differences in storytelling and Christian themes. Using screenwriting scholar Robert McKee's theories on story structure, this comparative analysis highlights the plot elements, conflicts, dialogue, and overall execution of the two films in order to identify their agreement or disagreement with establishing screenwriting theory. By providing a specific example of analysis between two films, this thesis provides insight as to how Christian faith can be portrayed in films produced by non-Christian and evangelical filmmakers. This insight bridges a divide in the faith-based film industry between mainstream and evangelical filmmakers seeking to ask spiritual questions in their work. In this time period in particular, as both filmmakers are finding critical and financial success with films dealing with Christian faith, this insight presents a standard for using established story structure to tell compelling spiritual stories.

Key words/topics located in thesis: Alex Kendrick, Christian film, *Courageous*, Robert McKee, story structure, Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, Spencer Lewerenz and Barbara Nicolosi published a collection of essays entitled *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture*. Since 1999, Lewerenz and Nicolosi had trained Christian screenwriters within the Act One program in Hollywood. (While Lewerenz left the program to teach elsewhere, Nicolosi still serves on the board of directors for Act One.) After many students had asked them how to engage culture as Christians, the instructors interviewed several colleagues working in film and television in Hollywood, asking their thoughts on the subject. The result was *Behind the Screen*, an anthology of 18 essays addressing how Christians can better influence culture through media.

One of these essays was “Opportunity Lost,” written by Biola University communications professor Craig Detwiler. The essay briefly chronicled the history of Jews in Hollywood and their rise to prominence in the film industry, as well as the decline of Christians in Hollywood due to decades of political tension and boycotting. Detwiler claimed that the tension between Christians and Jews in Hollywood still continued, including at the time of the release of *The Passion of the Christ*. According to Detwiler, the film’s 2004 release could have led to dialogue between Christian and Jewish audiences about Jesus. After decades of tension, this dialogue would have helped the two groups understand each other’s perspectives on faith and led to reconciliation. “The controversy over *The Passion of the Christ* presented the Christian community with an opportunity to build bridges with Hollywood’s Jewish community,” stated Detwiler. “Yet Christians missed this opportunity due to their ignorance of Hollywood’s painful history.”¹ A divide had formed between these Christians and non-Christians in Hollywood, preventing Christians from engaging culture.

Detwiler was not the only author to address this issue in *Behind the Screen*. Azusa Pacific University film professor Thomas Parham contributed his essay, “Why Do Heathens Make the Best Christian Films?” At the start of his essay, Parham compared two categories of films dealing with Christian faith. In one category were films about faith made by non-Christian filmmakers, such as *Places in the Heart* (1984) and *The Apostle* (1998). In the other category were faith-based films made by evangelicals, such as *The Omega Code* (1999) and *Left Behind* (2000). Parham called these films “unwatchable” and claimed, “Most films that successfully incorporate religious themes are made by nonreligious people.”² Noting the difference in the quality of the films, Parham observed another divide between secular and evangelical filmmakers.

This project asks the question: What are the differences and similarities between films dealing with Christian faith made by secular and evangelical filmmakers? Answering this question and addressing the divide between the two groups of filmmakers will give insight into how faith is portrayed in film. To address and bring insight to this divide will be relevant and beneficial to the current faith-based film industry.

Fox News declared the year 2014, a decade after the release of *The Passion of the Christ*, “the year of the Christian film.”³ Several faith-based motion pictures saw wide theatrical releases and commercial success. Many of these films, such as *God’s Not Dead*, *Moms’ Night Out*, and *Heaven is For Real*, were produced and distributed by openly evangelical filmmakers. Others, from big-budget epics *Noah* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* to the independently produced *Calvary*, came from non-Christian filmmakers.

Alissa Wilkinson, chief film critic for *Christianity Today*, noticed evangelical audiences responding differently to these films, embracing openly Christian films like *God’s Not Dead* and shunning others such as *Noah*. Wilkinson noted that *Calvary*, because of its mature content, “got left out of many ‘faith-based’ discussions,” although she considered the film “the most

‘Christian’ film released in 2014... rife with religious imagery and resonances.”⁴ She was convinced there was still a divide between secular and evangelical filmmaking about faith.

However, Wilkinson was also convinced that many filmmakers wanted to bridge that gap. She saw several films dealing with faith at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, such as *Last Days in the Desert*, *I Am Michael*, and *Don Verdean*, which were produced by non-Christians. As Wilkinson interviewed many filmmakers at Sundance, she found many filmmakers, whether or not they were religious or spiritual, who wanted to reconcile the divide between secular and evangelical filmmaking about faith and lead what she called “a burgeoning religious movement in independent cinema.”⁵

This reconciliation is what screenwriter Ron Austin hoped for when he wrote his essay “The Hollywood Divide” for *Behind the Screen*. Austin portrayed in his essay two differing perspectives on culture, those of the Christian and of the Hollywood secularist, and how both use film to address the human condition. Austin challenged these individuals, especially Christians, to move toward reconciliation with popular culture, “without an agenda, without preaching, and without trying to win. If he [the Christian] can truly make himself one with his secular adversary, he will necessarily begin to face his own inner struggles.”⁶ Ten years after the publication of *Behind the Screen*, faith-based films and their filmmakers on either side of the divide, secular and evangelical, still must bridge the divide by fully and lovingly engaging culture.

In order to create an in-depth study of faith-based filmmaking, two specific motion pictures have been chosen for comparison. These films have been selected because of their similar religious and spiritual themes and plot elements, their close proximity in theatrical release, and their critical and financial success in the mainstream film market. The films studied will be *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, both released in 2011.

The Tree of Life tells the story of the O’Brien family through different periods of their lives. As the film begins, Mrs. O’Brien receives a telegram informing her that her second of three sons,

19-year-old R. L., has died. She grieves with her husband and consequently questions God. Years later, the eldest O'Brien son, Jack, is still troubled as an adult by the uncertainty of life, including his brother's untimely death. Jack too questions God and looks pessimistically at the world around him. However, extended flashbacks through the film reveal the O'Brien family's past, particularly as Jack, R. L., and their youngest brother Steve grow up as preteens in Waco, Texas.

Young Jack faces tension with his strict, overbearing father, who believes in sternly disciplining his sons while Mrs. O'Brien treats them with more grace. Already conflicted by the opposing nature of his parents, Jack experiences more internal conflict as he wrestles with the existence and omnipotence of God. The O'Brien family has attended church regularly since Jack was an infant. Narration from Jack even depicts him praying to God and asking Him questions, especially when he faces tragedy. One of his friends drowns one day in a pool and dies. Another friend is critically scarred when his house catches on fire. Even Mr. O'Brien suffers when he loses a court case for a patent and eventually loses his job, forcing the family to move.

Soon, the injustice Jack experiences makes him resent the world around him. He takes joy in disobeying and ignoring his father. He becomes jealous of R. L., as he believes that his parents love R. L. more than him, and their relationship struggles as well. The questioning of God and familial tension that Jack experienced as a preteen ultimately carries into his adult life. Even years after R. L.'s death, Jack still has not been reconciled.

However, the film's final sequence depicts the whole O'Brien family and many of their friends reuniting on a beach. Here, Jack is finally at peace with his parents, especially his father. Mrs. O'Brien, who has questioned God constantly about why R. L. had to die young, finally lets her son go. This fantastical sequence, in contrast with the more realistic scenes portraying the lives of the O'Brien family, accompanies another sequence from the beginning of the film, portraying the creation of the universe. This sequence visualizes a verse of Scripture that opens

The Tree of Life: Job 38:1, where God asks suffering Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”

The Tree of Life was released theatrically by Fox Searchlight Pictures in May 2011 and opened initially in four theaters, eventually expanding to 237 screens across the United States. The film set a box-office record for Fox Searchlight, earning a per screen average of \$93,320 on its first weekend, soon after the film won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival.⁷ Ultimately, on a \$32 million production budget, *The Tree of Life* earned \$13 million domestically and \$54 million worldwide. The film was also nominated for three Academy Awards, for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Cinematography. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun Times*, as well as the British Film Institute in its *Sight and Sound* poll, named *The Tree of Life* one of the greatest films of the 21st century.⁸

Courageous tells multiple storylines about five families living in present-day Albany, Georgia. Four of the five fathers serve on the local police force. One of these officers is Adam Mitchell, husband of Victoria and father of teenaged Dylan and preteen Emily. Another is new officer Nathan Hayes, husband of Kayla and father of three, including teenaged Jade. Another officer is Shane Fuller, divorced father of preteen Tyler. The fourth officer is rookie David Thomson, who had a daughter outside of marriage whom he has never met. The fifth father is immigrant Javier Martinez, husband of Carmen and father of young Isabel and Marcos.

Each of these men is experiencing tension within his family. Adam is avoiding going running with Dylan, who is training for a 5K race and has started to believe that his father loves Emily more than him. Nathan and Kayla are preventing Jade from dating at her young age, much to Jade’s frustration. Shane resents paying alimony to his ex-wife and spends limited time with Tyler. David resists hearing about Adam and Nathan’s Christian faith, although he longs for hope since he is separated from his ex-girlfriend Amanda and daughter Olivia. Javier struggles to

find a steady, well paying job to provide for his family. Through all of this tension, all five men struggle to act as loving fathers and responsible leaders of their homes.

The tension culminates when Emily dies in a car accident. Adam, Victoria, and Dylan mourn her loss and consequently question God. However, after taking time to grieve, Adam goes to his pastor asking how he can be a better father for Dylan. Over several weeks, Adam consults prayer and Scripture for guidance as he creates the Resolution for Men, a commitment to fatherhood that each of the five fathers takes. Each father struggles to stay true to the commitment, especially Shane who backslides and is ultimately imprisoned for drug possession, but the remaining four fathers reconcile with their families. The four stand in church in the film's final scene as Adam speaks to the congregation and challenges men to step up as leaders for their families. The film concludes with a verse of Scripture: Joshua 24:15, which reads, "Choose today who you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

Courageous was produced by Sherwood Pictures, the film division of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia. The film was released theatrically by TriStar Pictures in September 2011, opening in 1,161 theaters and eventually playing on 1,214 screens. On a \$2 million production budget, the film earned \$34.5 million in the United States. *Courageous* became Sherwood's biggest success financially as well as critically. Reviewers for *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety* acknowledged the filmmakers' "growing expertise"⁹ and "prolific and increasingly accomplished filmmaking,"¹⁰ respectively. However, the reviews were overall mixed, resulting in scores of 42 on the film review website Metacritic and 30% on the review website Rotten Tomatoes (compared to scores of 85 and 84%, respectively, for *The Tree of Life*).

Both *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* told stories regarding familial relationships, the loss of a loved one, questioning God, reconciliation, and even succumbing to temptation. The films and their characters depict a specifically Christian worldview. The films also gained a substantial mainstream presence, with critical acclaim and financial success. However, *Courageous* did not

fare as well critically as *The Tree of Life* did. Likewise, *The Tree of Life*, unlike *Courageous*, in its lack of promotion and recognition from specifically Christian audiences, “bypassed evangelicals almost completely,” according to Tom Shone of *The Guardian*.¹¹

In their differences in reception from the public, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* represent two sides of faith-based filmmaking. The former was produced by filmmakers who were working within a secular production company and distributor. The latter was produced by openly evangelical Christian filmmakers. The films, despite their similarities in content and close proximity in release, were never associated with each other because of the differences in their filmmakers’ backgrounds. The differences increase when comparing the biographies and careers of the individual directors of the films, Terrence Malick for *The Tree of Life* and Alex Kendrick for *Courageous*.

Malick, born in 1943, grew up in Waco, Texas, and attended an Episcopal school in Austin during his youth. He studied philosophy at Harvard University, graduating in 1965 before moving to Magdalen College, Oxford, to pursue a Ph.D. There, Malick translated works by philosopher Martin Heidegger and, after a dispute with faculty over theories, left school before completing his degree.

Malick grew up with two younger brothers, Chris and Larry, the latter of who went on to study guitar in Spain in the late 1960’s under virtuoso guitarist Andres Segovia. When Larry broke his own hands due to stress in his studies, Malick was asked by his father to go to Spain to comfort Larry. Malick refused, leaving his father to travel to Spain instead and ultimately return with Larry’s body, after he had committed suicide.¹² This tragedy left Malick guilt-ridden for years and influenced the character and loss of Jack’s musically talented brother in *The Tree of Life* decades later.

After briefly working as a journalist, Malick enrolled in the inaugural class of the American Film Institute Conservatory. He graduated from AFI in 1971 and wrote screenplays for various

studios before directing his first feature film: *Badlands*. Costing an estimated \$500,000, the film was a fictitious drama based on the real-life killer Charles Starkweather. *Badlands* closed the 1973 New York Film Festival and was immediately considered a strong debut feature. *The New York Times*' Vincent Canby gave a rave review: "Malick tries not to romanticize his killers, and he is successful ... *Badlands* is a most important and exciting film."¹³

Five years later came Malick's second film, *Days of Heaven*. Set in Chicago in 1916, the film follows Bill, his girlfriend Abby, and his young sister Linda working in a wheat field as Bill flees from the law. The landowner falls in love with Abby, and tensions arise within the love triangle until a locust swarm destroys the field as well as the futures of the characters. *Days of Heaven* evoked images and themes alluding to the Biblical Books of Exodus and Ruth. The film's title is even derived from Deuteronomy 11:21.

Although Malick won the Best Director award at the 1978 Cannes Film Festival, the film received positive yet mixed critical reviews. Decades later, critic Roger Ebert addressed the "muted emotions"¹⁴ the film had been criticized for. However, Ebert praised the film as being told from Linda's childlike perspective and ultimately declared the film a masterpiece.

Having directed only two feature films, Malick was considered a filmmaker to watch. However, he did not direct another film until 1998. What he was doing in the 20 years between films is shrouded in mystery. Film critic Richard Corliss summarized the wide speculation on Malick's hiatus: "Was he living in a garage? Teaching philosophy at the Sorbonne?"¹⁵ Whatever Malick was doing, in 1998 he finally returned to filmmaking with *The Thin Red Line*. The war film depicts the Battle of Guadalcanal as soldiers contemplate the travesties of war, the beauty of nature, and the existence of God. The film garnered seven Academy Award nominations and became Malick's most commercially successful film, earning \$98 million on a \$52 million production budget.

Malick's fourth film was 2005's *The New World*, a retelling of the 17th-century love triangle between Captain John Smith, Pocahontas, and John Rolfe. The film received the most mixed reviews of Malick's career thus far. While some critics such as Mick LaSalle from the *San Francisco Chronicle* hailed the film as "a masterpiece,"¹⁶ others such as Todd McCarthy of *Variety* criticized the film's "muddled, lurching narrative" and "pictorial repetition of what Malick has done before."¹⁷

The high acclaim Malick received for *The Tree of Life* was not matched by his two films released subsequently, *To the Wonder* in 2013 and *Knight of Cups* in 2015. In fact, the films received the most negative reviews of Malick's career. *To the Wonder* earned less than \$1 million at the worldwide box office, on an unknown production budget.

Kendrick, born in 1970, grew up outside of Atlanta, Georgia. Although his family grew up without a television set in their home, Alex and his younger brother Stephen discovered an interest in storytelling through film. As youth, the two brothers created short videos with friends for fun. Both attended Kennesaw State University in Georgia, studying communications and graduating in 1994 and 1997, respectively. After graduating, Alex and Stephen continued to make videos while working with church youth during their studies at the Atlanta campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

In 1999, Alex Kendrick became the Associate Pastor of Media at Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia. Stephen Kendrick joined the church two years later as Senior Associate Pastor. While the brothers served at Sherwood, they discovered research done by The Barna Group declaring that media had more of an influence on society than the church. Prompted by their love for movies, the brothers approached Sherwood senior pastor Michael Catt about making a feature film for ministry use in the community.

In 2003, after much fundraising and prayer, Alex Kendrick directed *Flywheel*, about a dishonest used car salesman who repented after recommitting his life to God. Featuring a cast

and crew entirely consisting of volunteers, the film was produced for \$20,000. The only marketing for the film took place locally in Albany. However, when the film played at the local movie theater, multiple screenings sold out, as did DVD copies months later. Distribution through video rental outlet Blockbuster paved the way for the Kendrick brothers and the newly formed Sherwood Pictures to produce more films.

Sherwood's sophomore effort was *Facing the Giants* in 2006, a film about a high school football team that started winning games consistently after trusting in God. The film had a bigger budget and some professional equipment and producers, although all cast and crew were still volunteers. The film was eventually distributed by Provident Films, a division of Sony, and was released in 441 theaters across the United States. The film received overall negative reviews from critics, including Joe Leydon of *Variety* who criticized the film's "complete lack of dramatic tension."¹⁸ However, the film earned an enormous profit at the box office: \$10 million on a \$100,000 production budget.

The financial success of *Facing the Giants* led to the production of Sherwood's third feature, *Fireproof*, in 2008. The film, about a firefighter trying to save his marriage from divorce, actually featured an established Hollywood actor in the lead role, Kirk Cameron. Cameron, however, worked for free, along with the other cast and crew volunteering on the film. The film's theatrical release was wider and its budget higher, at \$500,000. *Fireproof* opened in 839 theaters in the United States and ranked fourth in the top 10 at the box office on opening weekend. Ultimately, the film made \$33 million domestically, despite negative critical reviews calling the film "melodramatic" and even "risible."¹⁹

The commercial success of these three previous films, along with DVD sales, Bible studies, and merchandise based on the films, led to the bigger-budget production and wide theatrical release of *Courageous*. In 2013, Alex and Stephen Kendrick founded Kendrick Brothers

Productions in order to continue producing films outside of the church as well as work alongside other Christian filmmakers from around the country.

The Tree of Life and *Courageous* rank among the greatest commercial and critical successes for Terrence Malick and Alex Kendrick. However, the two films, regardless of their strong mainstream presence, close proximity in release, and similar narrative content, were never associated with each other and have not yet been analyzed together.

This project will therefore analyze *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* based on their similar narrative themes and structures. Using the renowned story structure theories of screenwriting professor Robert McKee, this project will identify the story elements of both films and compare the differing structure between the comparable narratives. In doing so, this project will analyze the different storytelling of secular and evangelical filmmaking about faith.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project will contribute to ongoing research addressing the divide between secular and evangelical filmmaking about Christian faith. Christians working in media, such as the authors and editors of *Behind the Screen*, as well as non-Christians have analyzed the different methods both filmmaking groups use in order to connect with audiences. This project will do so through the analysis of two specific motion pictures, but other authors have used different methods for research. Addressing past studies will recognize the research that has already been completed on the topic and will distinguish this analysis from other projects regarding the relationship between Christian faith and filmmaking.

Heather Hendershot, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor of film and media, researched evangelical media and its impact for her book *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*. Hendershot, a non-Christian, analyzed the story, marketing, and commercial success (or failure) of evangelistic apocalyptic feature films such as *A Thief in the Night* (1972) and *The Omega Code* (1999), along with other evangelistic media that repeatedly failed in attempts to break into the mainstream. “The producers believe that these films are palatable to a mass audience,” reported Hendershot. “But even though they don’t mention Jesus, nonevangelical viewers easily identify and dismiss them as religious films.”¹

Terry Lindvall, Virginia Wesleyan College communications professor, has researched the history of evangelical Christian filmmaking. His book with co-author Andrew Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*, detailed the efforts of early Christian filmmakers and churches to combat Hollywood film with their own products. These filmmakers ranged from theologians and pastors using film for ministry use to film students attempting to use the craft of filmmaking for a higher purpose. Many of these filmmakers even

created evangelistic parodies of Hollywood classics and blockbusters. Mel White's *Charlie Churchman* series and John Schmidt's *Super Christian* shorts, for example, parodied the works of Charlie Chaplin and the *Superman* films, respectively. Lindvall and Quicke claimed that many Christian filmmakers were "ready to engage culture rather than merely condemn it."²

As researchers such as Hendershot, Lindvall, and Quicke have studied a broad history of faith in filmmaking, others, such as Oregon State University professor of film Bill Fech, have analyzed the works of a particular filmmaker focusing on spiritual themes. Fech studied the works of Terrence Malick while pursuing a Master's degree at Oregon State. Fech's thesis, "The Soul Announces Itself: Terrence Malick's Emersonian Cinema," recognized the director's "distinct, philosophical vision," as Fech stated, and compared Malick's first six films to the works of American transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. The thesis analyzed the antiheroes of *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, the journey to the transcendental soul in *The Thin Red Line*, characters' abandonment of material lives in *The New World* and *The Tree of Life*, and relational conflict in *To the Wonder*. *The Tree of Life* was compared to Emerson's essay concerning grief and suffering, "Experience". Fech claimed, "Like Emerson does in 'Experience,' *The Tree of Life* recognizes that the struggle between nature and grace, between love and hate, is an inherent part of existence, one that we navigate as best we can. Part of Jack's spiritual revelation is discovering that conflicting emotions and energies exist in the world."³

Steven Rybin, Georgia Gwinnett College assistant professor of film, also studied the films and techniques of Terrence Malick at Ohio University. Rybin's doctoral dissertation was *The Historical Thought of Film: Terrence Malick and Philosophical Cinema*, published in 2011 as *Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film*. In the dissertation, Rybin analyzed techniques of Malick's first five films that portrayed ideas of spirituality, including death representing narrative closure, characters questioning their worlds, and even camera movement representing differences in perspectives of characters. When Rybin addressed *The Tree of Life* in the

postscript of his published book, however, he argued that the spirituality found in Malick's work was not necessarily Christian. Even *The Tree of Life* and its explicitly Christian references, from the scenes in church to even the film's title, could be interpreted outside of the faith. Rybin argued that

“[t]he spirituality Malick himself strives to find in contemporary life does not find its moorings in any particular religion (Malick's vision of spirituality in *The Tree of Life* is malleable enough to include multiple forms of belief; the central metaphor of the title has roots in both Christianity and Judaism), but rather in the sensations of modern existence that have origins in the autobiographies of his characters and in past forms of human life.”⁴

Romeika Cortez also studied Malick's work at the University of Copenhagen with her thesis, “Art Film: An Analysis of Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*.” Cortez used the writings of film theorists David Bordwell and Torben Grodal on art cinema to analyze the filmmaking techniques of *The Tree of Life*. The thesis analyzed the film's cinematography, pacing, and narrative themes, in addition to addressing Malick's filmmaking career. “Terrence Malick uses allegorical passages in order to emit his thoughts instead of using more words,” Cortez stated. “Unlike classic mainstream cinema, which is based on embodied experiences, art cinema is characterized by its disembodiedness.”⁵ Because of the film's ambiguous storytelling and open ending, Cortez argued that *The Tree of Life* could be considered art cinema.

Adam Rosadiuk also studied a specific film by Malick for his graduate thesis at Concordia University, *Film and Philosophic Experience: Terrence Malick's “The Thin Red Line”*. Rosadiuk analyzed Malick's third film and its relation to philosophies on insight, from the works of Plato and Socrates to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. The dissertation specifically focused on character analysis in *The Thin Red Line*, including the use of voiceover, metaphorical images, and limited exposition of back-story. Ultimately, Rosadiuk

argued the 170-minute film created a film-viewing experience that transcended theory.

“Expecting a coherent philosophical statement from the film may be wrong headed,” argued Rosadiuk. “However, a filmmaking style alive to the elegant experiential phenomenon of ‘reading the world’ may have a great deal to say *about* [original emphasis] philosophy.”⁶

While these researchers have analyzed the works of Terrence Malick, Jacob Johnston chose to analyze a specific film of Alex Kendrick’s. Written during his graduate studies at Liberty University, Johnston’s thesis, “The Sherwood Method: Creating an Independent Christian Feature Film,” analyzed the creation of Kendrick’s film *Facing the Giants* rather than its content. This analysis chronicled the beginnings of Sherwood Pictures, as well as the general history of motion pictures, independent film, and evangelistic filmmaking. Johnston claimed Kendrick never shied away from his Christian faith (contrary to Malick’s spiritual ambiguity). However, also unlike Malick, Alex and Stephen Kendrick had little idea what they were doing when they set out to make their first film *Flywheel* in 2003. So, the Kendrick brothers and their team sought God for guidance through prayer. Johnston noted, “They spent every morning in prayer asking for help so that the film would glorify Him and not themselves. Even though the crew went into the filming process blindly, their needs were met.”⁷ Johnston used the production of *Facing the Giants* as an example of guidelines for Christian filmmakers to follow in the future: prayerfully considering all elements of production, telling stories creatively, and working as a united crew to represent a united church.

J. Ryan Parker also analyzed the history and works of Sherwood Pictures at the Graduate Theological Union. His dissertation, *Ministers of Movies: Sherwood Pictures and the Church Film Movement* (published in 2012 as *Cinema as Pulpit: Sherwood Pictures and the Church Film Movement*), detailed how the Kendricks and their colleagues grew in their knowledge of filmmaking to create films of larger scale, higher quality, and consistent evangelistic messages. Parker analyzed Sherwood Pictures’ first four films in terms of their stories, production,

marketing, reviews from critics and fans, and financial success. Parker argued that *Courageous*, with its larger production and marketing budget, represented a step forward for Christian filmmakers. He claimed that

“[m]any elements of *Courageous*’ production, marketing, and advertising speak volumes about Sherwood Pictures’ engagement with potential audiences, their awareness of changes in communication, their evolution as the preeminent Christian independent film studio, and, more broadly speaking, the future of independent filmmaking.”⁸

Melvin E. Brown at Capella University used the films of Sherwood Pictures to analyze film from a business perspective rather than an aesthetic perspective. Brown’s thesis, *Blue Oceans in the United States Motion Picture Industry: Christian Action Films*, contained a study on the potential box office profit for films produced by evangelical filmmakers within the action-adventure genre. Brown referred to this genre of evangelical films as a ‘blue ocean,’ meaning that the space for the genre in the industry does not yet exist. However, he argued, the films of Sherwood Pictures, which were openly evangelical and proved to be commercially successful, could open a door in the Christian film industry for action-adventure stories to be just as profitable. “*Courageous*, *Fireproof*, and *Facing the Giants*,” Brown asserted, “were substantially more profitable regarding investment budget and revenue generated at the box office than most secular films with significantly larger budgets and film industry notoriety.” Brown compared the commercial success of these “practical application Christian films,”⁹ as he named them, to that of *The Passion of the Christ* or the *Chronicles of Narnia* films, faith-based films with larger budgets and box office revenue but a smaller return on investment.

Shannon Benton at Liberty University also analyzed the commercial success and marketing strategies of the work of Sherwood Pictures for her thesis, “Christian Entertainment: Methods Used in Targeting the Christian and Secular Audiences.” In addition to studying the promotion

of *Facing the Giants*, *Fireproof*, and *Courageous*, Benton presented a case study on another motion picture from distributor Provident Films, *October Baby* (2012). The analysis considered the use of online advertising, social media, sponsorships, endorsements, press releases, advance screenings, and supplemental material to promote *October Baby* and faith-based films in general. Benton noted that the initial target audience for the films consisted of Christians, who were considered a built-in audience for faith-oriented films. Benton's thesis challenged Christian filmmakers and Christian entertainment companies to produce work that would create conversations about important issues, similar to how, as Benton claimed, *October Baby* created an important pro-life dialogue. "These conversations," argued Benton, "can be used by Christians as a gateway to broach topics in which non-Christian friends and family members would not normally engage...Essentially, these films equip Christians with a strategy to engage in those tough conversations with loved ones."¹⁰

As researchers have studied the films of both Terrence Malick and Alex Kendrick, comparative analysis has been used to analyze the films in the context of other motion pictures and popular culture. As Tibe Patrick Jordan studied Malick's work at Florida Atlantic University, he compared *The Thin Red Line* with another World War Two film also released in 1998, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, in his thesis, *A War On Two Fronts*. Jordan investigated the similarities and differences between the films in terms of genre, comparing the films' "underlying issues of violence, masculinity, and nationalism."¹¹ After analyzing both films, Jordan concluded that, although both brought revisions to the war film genre, *Saving Private Ryan* had more in common with the traditional war film and its conventions, which *The Thin Red Line* strayed away from.

Sarah French and Zoë Shacklock at the University of Melbourne similarly analyzed Malick's *The Tree of Life* in comparison with another motion picture from the same year. Their research article, "The affective sublime in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* and Terrence Malick's *The Tree*

of Life,” analyzed the element of the ‘sublime’ in the two films based on the theories of philosophers Brian Massumi and Jean-François Lyotard. Each film characterized the ‘sublime’ with a slow pace, a cyclical narrative structure, and depiction of transcendence. One sequence in *The Tree of Life* categorized by French and Shacklock as ‘sublime’ was the sequence depicting the creation of the universe. “The sublime images of the birth of the universe achieve their impact,” argued the authors, “not through form or representation, which remain organized around the classic technique of the montage, but through signifying things that lie beyond this frame.”¹²

While Jordan specifically analyzed a particular film by Terrence Malick, Jonathan Pfenninger at Liberty University analyzed Alex Kendrick’s *Courageous* in his thesis, “Choices in the Editing Room: How the Intentional Editing of Dialogue Scenes through Shot Choice can Enhance Story and Character Development within Motion Pictures.” Pfenninger compared the editing style of *Courageous* to that of five Academy Award-winning and nominated films, *The Social Network*, *The Fighter*, and *The King’s Speech* (all 2010) and *Moneyball* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (both 2011). Criteria for selecting these films for analysis included the films’ commercial and critical success as well as their proximity in theatrical release. Pfenninger argued, “The editing styles of all these films having been created within the same media culture and in the same historical period generally have the same influences and are theoretically comparable.”¹³ Pfenninger analyzed the visual style in all these motion pictures and concluded that *Courageous* lacked the aesthetic value held by the other five films.

Comparative analysis has also been used to study films dealing with Christian faith made by other filmmakers besides Malick and Kendrick. Aaron V. Burton at Bowling Green State University used comparisons of selected motion pictures to analyze the differences between evangelistic Christian films in his dissertation, *Jesus in the Movies: A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Films from 1912-2004*. The dissertation analyzed six motion pictures on the life of

Christ, the oldest being *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) and the latest being *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). The comparison chronicled the changes in the portrayal of Christianity in film over almost a century. Burton claimed, “Artists have attempted to communicate historical and biblical messages using rhetorical devices in order to appeal to both Christian and secular audiences. Christianity in secular mediums, in particular the presence of Christianity in film, warrants a rhetorical study.”¹⁴ The analysis concluded that while the films all exemplified themes of sacrifice and vengeance, the character of Jesus generally transitioned over the decades from being more divine to human, especially after the 1960’s and 1970’s.

Geoffrey Macnaughton similarly compared several motion pictures about faith in his studies at York University. His thesis, *Narrative and Spatial Structures of Reverence: The Biblical Film Between 1964-2004*, compared several films to analyze the change in the cinematic portrayal of the Bible over decades. Primarily analyzing *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), Macnaughton chronicled the prominence, decline, and revival of the Biblical film genre. “Using the decline of the Epic state of the genre as an entry-point,” as he stated, Macnaughton compared the earlier Biblical films with the most recent, in order to analyze how the filmmakers “manipulated two spaces of spectacle (church and cinema) to make the church-going and cinema-going indistinguishable.”¹⁵ Over the decades, these Biblical films gradually bridged the divide between the church and the cinema in their exhibition, notably with *The Passion of the Christ*, whose filmmakers invited droves of churchgoers to attend screenings, contributing to the film’s box office success.

Lara T. Sumera at San Jose State University also analyzed several films about faith in her thesis, *The Representation of Christianity in Popular American Films from 2000-2005*. However, the films analyzed came not from openly Christian filmmakers but from secular film distributors and producers. The analysis focused specifically on character analysis in several films. Sumera argued, “By looking at characters’ attitude towards faith, and the circumstances in which they

exercise their religion, general themes will hopefully emerge as to how Christianity is used in narrative.”¹⁶ Sumera’s analysis specifically focused on certain films released between 2000 and 2005, categorized into one of three genres: action, comedy, and drama. Sumera observed from her findings that the depiction of Christianity in the 15 films analyzed ultimately ranged between both positive and negative, thereby revealing an unclear representation of the overall portrayal of Christian faith in that era of film.

Although not analyzing films dealing with Christianity, Carolina Crespo Steinke at the University of Granada also compared two similar motion pictures to analyze different filmmaking techniques, as well as the changes in the film industry over decades. Steinke’s thesis, “The Newer the Better? A Comparison of the 1974 and 2013 Film Adaptations of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Novel *The Great Gatsby*,” compared two motion picture adaptations of the same book. This analysis considered Fitzgerald’s background, the time periods during which the novel and films were produced, and the narrative elements of the story. Ultimately, although Steinke acknowledged that the 2013 film version was truer than the 1974 film to the structure and themes of the original novel, she concluded that classifying one film as ‘better’ over the other was dependent on the individual viewer’s preference. The purpose of the comparison was not to judge the films but to analyze the concept of adaptation. Steinke argued, “...The comparison is not an evaluative criterion but a tool to explore the reasons why the director chose to introduce changes.”¹⁷

This project will contribute to these research projects, comparisons, and film analyses in the examination of the portrayal of Christianity in secular and evangelical filmmaking; however, this project will choose two motion pictures specifically for analysis in order to provide an in-depth example of that portrayal. While Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and Alex Kendrick’s *Courageous* have been analyzed in some of these previous research projects, those analyses have studied the films based on filmmaking elements other than their story structure and characters,

which this project will address. Additionally, while the films have been compared in several of these studies to other motion pictures with similar aesthetics or theatrical releases, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* have not yet been analyzed together. This project is the first to study the narrative elements of both these films. Doing so will provide a specific comparative example of secular and evangelical filmmaking about Christian faith.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Robert K. Johnston, Fuller Theological Seminary professor of theology and culture, addressed modern media and culture in relation to Christian faith in his book *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Johnston analyzed several elements of filmmaking, from the narrative to the visuals to the soundtrack, and argued that the foundation of a motion picture is built upon a story. He stated, "... The traditional elements of story—character, plot, narration, and setting—are intensified in film through the actor's portrayals, the freedom of film time to move nonsequentially, and the use of images and special effects, to say nothing of soundtracks and sound effects."¹

Therefore, to analyze the similarities between *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, this analysis will focus solely on those traditional elements of story. To study these films' narrative elements, this project will use a screenwriting and story structure model recognized as one of the most respected in the filmmaking and screenwriting industries: the story structure theories of former University of Southern California professor Robert McKee, theories outlined in his bestselling book, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*.² In the book, McKee addressed the importance as well as the method of story structure.

McKee introduced his book addressing what he called The Story Problem, or the repetition and unoriginality that plagued modern storytelling. McKee claimed that because of the vast amounts of literature, theater, television, and motion pictures available in contemporary culture, understanding the art of story was essential. He even argued that story in present culture had taken precedence over religion. "Religion, for many," he claimed, "has become an empty ritual that masks hypocrisy. As our faith in traditional ideologies diminishes, we turn to the source we still believe in: the art of story."³

McKee claimed the art of story was an opportunity to not only escape life but also to portray life. “*Story is metaphor for life* [original emphasis],” argued McKee, stating that story should tell the truth about life but not tell it verbatim. “The weakest possible excuse to include anything in a story is: ‘But it actually happened.’ Everything happens; everything imaginable happens. Indeed, the unimaginable happens. But story is not life in actuality. Mere occurrence brings us nowhere near the truth. What happens is fact, not truth. Truth is what we *think about* [original emphasis] what happens.”⁴ In his book, McKee outlined the story elements that create this ‘metaphor for life’.

These story elements create what McKee named “The Structure Spectrum,” or the overall design of a story. *Stories* are broken down into *acts*, caused by reversals of values in *sequences* consisting of *scenes*. Individual scenes contain *beats*, or actions and reactions in behavior, which create *events* that outline the conflict in story that is resolved by the ending. A story consists of many moments in a character’s life, noted McKee, but those moments must be the most important ones that best suit the story structure. “The life story of each and every character offers encyclopedic possibilities. The mark of a master is to select only a few moments but give us a lifetime.”⁵

McKee also addressed structure in relation to four other story elements: setting, genre, character, and meaning. Setting refers to a story’s location, time period, duration, and level of conflict. Genres range from love stories to comedies to social and domestic dramas. McKee claimed that structure and character are interlocked, as a character’s choices made during conflict create event structure and reveal the character’s true nature. Meaning in structure refers to a story’s ‘Controlling Idea’ or thesis statement, which creates a thesis/anti-thesis debate throughout the story. McKee emphasized the limitations of setting, the conventions of genre, the credibility of character, and the importance of meaning in story, reminding the writer of his responsibility. “I believe we have no responsibility to cure social ills or renew faith in humanity, to uplift the

spirits of society or even express our inner being,” stated McKee. “We have only one responsibility: *to tell the truth* [original emphasis].”⁶ Therefore, McKee claimed that telling the truth in story involved following certain story design principles.

These principles included a willful protagonist with a conscious or unconscious desire, multiple levels of conflict for the character (inner, personal, and extra-personal), and the character taking a ‘first step’ in pursuing his goal. “In story,” McKee stated, “we concentrate on that moment, and only that moment, in which a character takes an action expecting a useful reaction from his world, but instead the effect of his action is to provoke forces of antagonism.”⁷

That moment McKee named the Inciting Incident, i.e., the event that “radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist’s life”⁸ and forces the protagonist to react. The Inciting Incident creates conscious or unconscious awareness in the protagonist of the desire to somehow restore balance. This event begins the protagonist’s quest to find that Object of Desire, as McKee named it, that may or may not restore balance and defeat the inner, personal, or extra-personal forces of antagonism in his life.

The protagonist’s quest culminates in the Crisis, the ultimate dilemma for the protagonist who, “when face-to-face with the most powerful and focused forces of antagonism in his life, must make a decision to take one action or another in a last effort to achieve his Object of Desire.”⁹ The crisis concludes in the story’s Climax, where the protagonist and story’s values come at “a value swing at maximum charge that’s absolute and irreversible. The meaning of that change moves the heart of the audience.”¹⁰ This moment in the story, McKee enforced, is not to be taken lightly or skimmed over: this event brings the conclusion to the story and whether or not the protagonist will achieve his goal. This conclusion is the Resolution, which either presents a successful or failed attempt at the protagonist’s fulfillment.

McKee also addressed the nature of act design and scene design, both consisting of specific story events. Acts contain what McKee referred to as progressive complications, or Points of No

Return. “A story must not retreat to actions of lesser quality or magnitude,” claimed McKee, “but move progressively forward to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.”¹¹ In addition to these moments, acts may contain subplots, or other storylines “used to resonate the Controlling Idea of the Central Plot and enrich the film with variations on a theme.”¹² The multiplying of scenes and subplots within an act can give substance to a story, although McKee warned that too many scenes and subplots would result in repetitious act design.

Just as overall acts are made up of story events, each scene must contain certain elements as well. McKee argued that scenes must contain turning points, setups, payoffs, and emotional transitions. These events, which provide each scene with purpose and closure, support McKee’s theory of the thesis/anti-thesis debate that motivates a story. The character must make definitive decisions at turning points, which reveal character, progress the plot, and present a complex argument. McKee argued that these decisions must indeed be complex: the character must choose either between two irreconcilable goods or the lesser of two evils. “How a character chooses in a true dilemma,” claimed McKee, “is a powerful expression of his humanity and of the world in which he lives.”¹³

To determine a scene’s text (that is, content and its meaning on the surface) and subtext (meaning below the surface), McKee outlined steps to scene analysis. These guidelines were divided into five steps: defining conflict; noting the scene’s opening value; breaking the scene into beats; noting the closing value and comparing it with the opening value; and surveying beats and locating the scene’s turning point. McKee demonstrated these steps by analyzing scenes from the films *Casablanca* (1942) and *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961). The analyses defined the scenes’ conflict and their progress from beginning to end. McKee used these examples to demonstrate scenes that successfully built conflict and revealed complex characters. McKee believed that

“[i]ll-written scenes may lack conflict because desires are not opposed, may be antiprogressive because they’re progressive or circular, lopsided because their Turning Points come too early or too late, or lacking credibility because dialogue and action are ‘on the nose.’ But an analysis of a problematic scene that tests beats against scene objectives, altering behavior to fit desire or desire to fit behavior, will lead to a rewrite that brings the scene to life.”¹⁴

McKee also addressed several additional story elements for the writer to consider. The Principle of Antagonism refers to the forces working against the protagonist and the level at which those forces operate. Exposition refers to the amount of back-story delivered for plot and character. Flashbacks are dramatizations of past events in the narrative, which McKee argued are dangerous for delivering exposition. “If we try to force exposition into a film through novel-like free associative editing or semisubliminal flutter cuts that ‘glimpse’ a character’s thoughts, it strikes us as contrived.”¹⁵ However, McKee argued that montages, or quickly cut images that condense time to relay information, are just as harmful to a story if used incorrectly. He nearly rejected the use of montages altogether: “With few exceptions, montages are a lazy attempt to substitute decorative photography and editing for dramatization and are, therefore, to be avoided.”¹⁶

Robert McKee’s *Story* provides an in-depth and insightful guideline on screenwriting and story structure. This project will use the book, its theories on scene analysis, and the terminology on story events and devices to analyze and identify the story structure and narrative elements of *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*. By identifying the events in the films with McKee’s corresponding story elements, this project will provide a comparison on the similarities as well as differences of the storytelling of each film in order to analyze the different storytelling of secular and evangelical filmmaking about faith.

Additionally, in order to offer critical reactions to both films upon their initial theatrical release, the project will reference nine reviews from film critics of both *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*. Because *The Tree of Life* received more critical reviews than *Courageous* (on film review site Metacritic.com, *The Tree of Life* has 43 reviews from critics, while *Courageous* has 10), only film reviews from the same outlets will be referenced.

Both *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* received reviews from *The Hollywood Reporter*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Village Voice*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The A.V. Club*, *Variety*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. These publications, based on high circulation and viewership, are considered some of the top sources of credible film reviews.¹⁷ These reviews provide relevant critical insight from across the United States into the films' narrative structure, character arcs, and filmmaking techniques.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This analysis will divide the plot and story elements of *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* into sections based on three-act structure as advocated by Robert McKee, in order to provide specific examples of similarities and differences in the plot and story structure of both films.

Additionally, certain scenes from both films have been selected for scene analysis, in order to specifically compare character development and dialogue. The following chart identifies the major story elements in both *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*:

The Tree of Life

ACT ONE

1. **Setup** – The O’Brien family is introduced in flashbacks to 1950’s Texas.
2. **Inciting Incident** – Middle son R. L. O’Brien dies in late 1960’s. His parents mourn. Eldest son Jack O’Brien, as an adult, still grieves in present-day.

ACT TWO

1. **Inner Conflict** – The O’Brien family, particularly Jack, struggles with God.
2. **Personal Conflict** – The O’Brien family experience dispute.
3. **Extra-personal Conflict** – Jack and his friends face a struggle with authority.
4. **Points of No Return** – The O’Brien boys watch their friends experience hardship. Later, Jack is tempted by friends to join in property destruction and breaks into a house.
5. **Low Point** – Jack shoots R. L. with a toy gun and feels strong remorse.
6. **Reconciliation Before Climax** – R. L. and Jack reconcile before their family moves.

ACT THREE

1. **Climax** – In a dreamlike sequence, the O’Brien family reunites and reconciles in Heaven.
2. **Resolution** – Mrs. O’Brien prays a prayer of surrender to God about her son’s death. Jack has a new, more positive outlook on life.
3. **Premise and “Controlling Idea”** – Family is reconciled when we surrender our past failures.

Courageous

ACT ONE

1. **Setup** – Adam Mitchell and his family, along with four other families in his community, are introduced, all having domestic struggles.
2. **Inciting Incident** – Adam’s daughter Emily dies. Adam mourns with his wife Victoria and son Dylan, along with his fellow neighbors and police officers.

ACT TWO

1. **Inner Conflict** – Adam, Shane, Nathan, David, and Javier all struggle with God.
2. **Personal Conflict** – All five families experience dispute.
3. **Extra-personal Conflict** – The policemen characters face an environment of crime.
4. **Points of No Return** – The five fathers commit to the Resolution for Men, which leads to reconciliation, leadership, bonding, and a more faithful work ethic.
5. **Low Point** – Shane Fuller is caught collecting drugs and is arrested.
6. **Reconciliation Before Climax** – Adam reconciles with Shane in prison.

ACT THREE

1. **Climax** – The four police officers have a final shootout with local drug dealers.
2. **Resolution** – Adam, Nathan, David, and Javier challenge fathers in church to be better leaders of their homes.
3. **Premise and “Controlling Idea”** – Family is reconciled when fathers commit to taking a stand to lead.

Act One – Setup

The Tree of Life

The Tree of Life is told in a nonlinear story structure that transitions to different settings and time periods throughout, from the O'Brien family living in 1950's Texas, then to Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien living by themselves in the late 1960's, and then to Jack as an adult in the new millennium. Flashbacks to the past, juxtaposed with images of Mrs. O'Brien and Jack in later years, imply the scenes as memories in the characters' minds. Voiceover narrations also occur throughout the film, primarily from Jack (both as a youth and as an adult) and his mother. The narrations serve not merely to vocalize the characters' thoughts but also to verbalize their questions to God.

The film opens with a quote from the Book of Job, a slowly moving image of a flame that appears throughout the film, and a momentary reflective narration by adult Jack O'Brien. Following this are flashbacks of Mrs. O'Brien as a child, interacting with her loving father and animals on a farm filled with dandelions as her narration is heard: "The nuns taught us there are two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace." Not only does this reveal exposition about Mrs. O'Brien's religious upbringing, but the narration also establishes a central conflict that continues throughout the film: the conflict between nature and might versus grace and love.

More images appear, now set in 1950's Texas, where Mrs. O'Brien plays in the neighborhood with her children as her narration explains the difference between nature and grace. Her description of grace – the desire to please others and accept being ignored – is heard underneath images of herself, while her description of nature – wanting to only please oneself – accompanies images of Mr. O'Brien leading his family in prayer at dinner. Mrs. O'Brien's narration concludes, under images of a waterfall and a tree (among the many images of nature interspersed

throughout the film), as she claims, “no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end” – then, speaking to God, “I will be true to you... whatever comes.”

In its opening minutes, *The Tree of Life* quickly introduces the entire O’Brien family (although Mrs. O’Brien has the most development of all the characters), as well as the conflict that will progress through the film. As scenes in the film’s second act reveal, the dichotomy between nature and grace is constantly explored through the disciplinary attitude of Mr. O’Brien and the more loving attitude of Mrs. O’Brien. Furthermore, Mrs. O’Brien’s final line of voiceover in this series of scenes leads into the film’s Inciting Incident; her promise to trust in God “whatever comes” will soon be put to the test.

Courageous

Courageous is told in a linear story structure, as scenes are in chronological order and do not transition backward or forward in time. In the film’s opening scenes, characters are clearly identified by name in work and home settings. Delivery of exposition in these opening scenes, however, is mainly through dialogue rather than visuals. However, there are scenes early on where the police officer characters – Adam Mitchell, Shane Fuller, David Thomson, and Nathan Hayes – are shown on the job, which not only shows the interactions between characters but also provides the story with action and tension.

The film opens with Nathan Hayes at a gas station, where his car is broken into and driven off by a thug. Nathan runs after him not to save the car but to save his infant son inside. This scene introduces the film as a story with action as well as themes of justice and fatherhood. Eventually, Nathan rescues his car and his son after the thug escapes. In the following scene, he speaks with Adam Mitchell and Shane Fuller and tells them he is joining the police force the following week. This conversation gives the characters an opportunity to meet and establish relationships.

That next week, after the officers arrest two men for drug possession, subsequent scenes show the Mitchell and Hayes family interacting at home, revealing tension between parents and children. Later, Javier and the Martinez family are introduced, not only revealing their own financial struggles but also adding to the spiritual aspect of the film as Javier prays and asks God what He wants him to do. Eventually, Javier starts working for Adam, and he joins the four other fathers in the narrative.

Fatherhood is also addressed early on in the film, in addition to the opening scene with Nathan and his son. Adam and Shane discuss the consequences of Nathan risking his life for his son after they meet Nathan. The next week, the sheriff reads an email he received to the officers with statistics about crime coming from fatherless homes. In a later scene, as Adam, Shane, Nathan, and David have a barbeque at the Mitchell house, the four men discuss their own fathers and how their lives were impacted by their fathers' decisions.

This not only reveals exposition about the characters but also introduces the theme of fatherly leadership that will be explored through the rest of the story. However, although the story progresses, characters are developed, and the theme of fatherhood is further explored in these scenes, the pacing suffers due to a prevalence of subplots and heavy use of dialogue rather than visual storytelling. By the time the Inciting Incident occurs in *Courageous*, the viewer may not be able to focus on the narrative because of an overload of information.

Inciting Incident

The Tree of Life

Mrs. O'Brien answers the door to find a mailman with a telegram for her. She walks through the house and reads the telegram. As she reads, she stops walking. She sits down, drops the telegram, and starts walking around again, tears welling in her eyes. Finally, she falls to her knees and cries out, "Oh, God!" In the next scene, with no audible dialogue, Mr. O'Brien is

working in an airfield answering a nearby phone. He struggles to hear the other line, but when he does, his face becomes filled with horror. Later, he walks back out to the airfield, watching the sunset, unable to stand still. Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, as is revealed later in the first act, have just lost their son R. L.

The following several minutes of *The Tree of Life* play more like a sequence of images, similar to the film's introduction, rather than scenes. Moments cut suddenly from one to the next as Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien walk through their house and neighborhood as friends come to try to console them. Mrs. O'Brien's narration reveals her uncertainty and doubt towards God. Though she tries to recite Scripture, attempting to remind herself to "fear no evil," her narration also expresses hopelessness ("What did you gain?").

Mr. O'Brien and eldest son Jack are also grieved by the tragedy. Following the scene where Mrs. O'Brien grieves with her mother, Mr. O'Brien talks to his wife in the front yard, remembering a time when he criticized R. L.'s playing the piano. He cries and quietly reflects: "I made him feel shame – my shame. Poor boy!" The sequence closes with Mr. O'Brien silently walking alone in the woods before transitioning to Jack's character arc.

Jack, now a grown adult living in an unidentified big city, relates voiceover narration expressing frustration and cynicism of his environment underneath images of his home and workplace. He wakes up, gets ready for work, and lights a candle while narrating about R. L. and his death at age 19. At work, Jack stares into space at meetings, walks through the hallways with a blank look on his face, and discusses plans with coworkers in a monotone voice. "The world's gone to the dogs," Jack narrates. "People are greedy, keep getting worse." Jack's attitude manifests itself not only through his dry voiceover narration, but also visually through his half-hearted interactions with others and disinterest in the office.

However, as Jack reflects on his childhood and R. L. in particular, he wonders about that 'nature of grace' he found in both R. L. and his mother. "How did she bear it," he asks God, as

he remembers his mother during her time of grieving. At this point in the narrative, the point of view transitions back to Mrs. O'Brien, wandering through her house and the woods silently. Her narration reveals her questioning God: "Was I false to you? Lord, why? Where were you?" As she walks through the woods and closes her eyes, prompted by this inciting incident of her son's untimely death, the narrative begins its second act.

Courageous

Adam is working on construction at his house with Javier one day, making conversation about their families. Shortly after Adam refers to Emily as his "sweet nine-year-old" and Dylan as his "stubborn 15-year-old," Shane drives up in his police car in uniform, disturbed, and informs Adam that Emily has been in a car accident. Adam runs to Shane's car, and Javier says a brief prayer for them as they drive away. Adam also prays as Shane informs him of the situation in the car, but by the time they arrive at the hospital, it is too late – Emily has passed away. In a brief scene with inaudible dialogue, Adam arrives, and Victoria, who has just been speaking to a doctor, falls into his arms, weeping. Adam looks around and sees doctors as well as several of his fellow officers in the room. Rather than using dialogue to reveal that Emily is dead, this moment uses only visuals and action, making the event more potent.

A minimal use of dialogue continues through the next several scenes in the film. The Mitchell family, along with Adam's fellow officers and an entire congregation, sits in silence listening to the pastor's eulogy at Emily's funeral. The pastor, though he shares extensively about a hope for life after death, recognizes in his address that silence is appropriate: "What can we, as mere men, say to a grieving and shattered heart?" This scene is followed by a brief, silent montage of neighbors and friends approaching the Mitchells' house with condolences. These quiet moments are in stark contrast to the dialogue-driven scenes of exposition that introduced the film and its characters, making this event stand out in the story as a turning point for the characters.

One night, Adam has a dream about Emily and wakes up regretting not spending enough time with her. In the next scene, Adam shares his grief with his pastor, who shares with Adam about taking time to grieve and be thankful for the time he had with Emily while she was still alive. Finally, Adam shares his Object of Desire: “I want to know what God expects of me as a father. And I want to know how to help my wife and my son.” Prompted by the Inciting Incident of his daughter’s untimely death, Adam asks the pastor to help him propel the story in a new direction, beginning the film’s second act.

Scene Analysis – Families Grieving

The Tree of Life

As friends try to console the O’Brien’s, Mrs. O’Brien’s own mother attempts unsuccessfully to find the right words to say to her grieving daughter. This conversation has been selected for scene analysis.¹ The conflict in this sequence for Mrs. O’Brien is to find comfort during their time of grief, while her mother’s conflict is to try to comfort her daughter. As the sequence begins, the opening value at stake is Mrs. O’Brien’s consolation.

EXT. O’BRIEN NEIGHBORHOOD

MRS. O’BRIEN, crying, sits outside with her MOTHER.

Mrs. O’Brien’s action: GRIEVING.

MOTHER

You still have your memories of him and...
You have to be strong now and...

Mother’s reaction: ENCOURAGING.

MRS. O’BRIEN continues to cry.

Mrs. O’Brien’s action: REFUSING TO MOVE ON.

¹ The scenes from *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* used for scene analysis have been transcribed by Sean O’Connor based on the Blu-ray/DVD copies of the films. The screenplays for *The Tree of Life* (located at Scribd.com) and *Courageous* (provided by Kendrick Brothers Productions) were used as references for the transcription; however, the final films do not consistently reflect their shooting scripts.

The MOTHER nods and starts over.

Mother's reaction: TRYING SOMETHING ELSE.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

I know, the pain will pass in time. You know, it might seem hard, my saying that, but it's true.

Mother's action: LOOKING AHEAD.

MRS. O'BRIEN

(whispering)

I don't want it to.

Mrs. O'Brien's reaction: HOLDING ON TO THE PAST.

MOTHER

Life goes on. People pass along. Nothing stays the same. You've still got the other two.

Mother's action: FRANKLY ACKNOWLEDGING THE TRUTH.

MRS. O'BRIEN looks at her harshly, tears still streaming down her face. Then she closes her eyes.

Mrs. O'Brien's reaction: HOLDING BITTERNESS.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Well, the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away, you know. That's the way He is.

Mother's action: REMINDING HER OF HER FAITH.

MRS. O'BRIEN wipes away tears with her handkerchief.

Mrs. O'Brien's reaction: TRYING TO FIND COMFORT.

INSERT: the O'Brien boys' treehouse.

MOTHER (CONT'D) (O.S.)

He sends flies to wounds that He should heal...

Mother's action: CITING A HIGHER POWER.

In the distance is the sound of MRS. O'BRIEN weeping bitterly.

Mrs. O'Brien's reaction: REFUSING TO BE CONSOLED.

The sound of Mrs. O'Brien weeping which closes this scene is heard in the background, as if from another point in time. However, the placement of this sound brings the scene to a strong closing negative value. Surveying the beats (the actions and the reactions) in this dialogue determines the scene's turning point (indicated in italics):

1. Grieving/Encouraging
2. Refusing to Move On/Trying Something Else
3. Looking Ahead/Holding On to the Past
4. *Frankly Acknowledging the Truth/Holding Bitterness*
5. Reminding Her of Her Faith/Trying to Find Comfort
6. Citing a Higher Power/Refusing to Be Consoled

The scene turns when Mrs. O'Brien's mother reminds her of the harsh truth, that life goes on, she still has two sons, and God works in mysterious ways. However, Mrs. O'Brien becomes bitter and further grieved rather than comforted. This scene brings Mrs. O'Brien, and the narrative itself, into a negative value as her hope fades during her time of grief. This progression is appropriate in order for Mrs. O'Brien to begin her journey to find answers from God in this dark time in her life.

Courageous

Following the montage of friends coming to console the Mitchell family is a scene where Victoria joins Adam in Emily's room as he sits silently by her bed, thinking about her. Adam and Victoria talk and mourn together before Adam is prompted to talk to Dylan, who is silently sitting in his bedroom playing video games. This extended scene has also been selected for scene analysis. The conflict in this scene is for Adam to be consoled after Emily's death, for Victoria to find answers as to why she had to die, and for Dylan to be at peace and left alone. The opening values at stake in the scene are Adam and Victoria's comfort as well as Dylan's privacy.

INT. EMILY'S ROOM - MITCHELL HOUSE

ADAM is sitting on the floor holding a picture of Emily.

Adam's action: REMEMBERING.

VICTORIA walks in and sits down across from him. She is emotionally drained.

Victoria's reaction: JOINING HIM.

VICTORIA
(sighs)
Make sense of this for me.

Victoria's action: SEEKING GUIDANCE.

ADAM just looks at her, not knowing what to say.

Adam's reaction: OFFERING NOTHING.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)
I feel like I'm in a fog, or some type of
black hole... and I really want to get out.

Victoria's action: EXPRESSING CONFUSION.

ADAM looks at her with empathy as she starts to tear up.

Adam's reaction: SILENTLY AGREEING.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)
I mean, were we wrong to let her go to that
party? If I had said 'no', she'd still be
here.

Victoria's action: EXPRESSING REGRET.

VICTORIA sobs. ADAM starts shaking his head.

ADAM
Victoria, we can't do that.

Adam's reaction: DISCOURAGING REGRET.

VICTORIA
(angrily)
Well, why was she the one who had to be
killed? And why is that drunk still alive?
Why? Why!

Victoria's action: LASHING OUT.

VICTORIA cries. ADAM finds no words to respond.

Adam's reaction: TRYING TO FIND ANSWERS.

After a moment, VICTORIA looks down, realizing ADAM is struggling too. He stares at the picture again.

Victoria's action: SYMPATHIZING.

ADAM
There's so many things I didn't say. I should have been a better father.

Adam's action: EXPRESSING REGRET.

VICTORIA looks up at him.

VICTORIA
No. You're still a father.

Victoria's reaction: ENCOURAGING HIM TO LEAD.

ADAM looks back at her. Then he gets up and walks down the hall to DYLAN's room. ADAM's hand tries to turn DYLAN's doorknob, but it is locked.

Adam's action: ATTEMPTING TO CONNECT.

INSIDE THE BEDROOM

DYLAN has headphones on playing a video game while sitting on a floor chair. He has a stoic expression.

Dylan's reaction: SHUTTING EVERYONE OUT.

ADAM feels the top of the doorframe and finds a small straight key. He sticks it in DYLAN's doorknob and pops the lock open.

Adam's action: LETTING HIMSELF IN.

INT. DYLAN'S ROOM - MITCHELL HOUSE

The door opens behind DYLAN as ADAM enters. ADAM stands there watching DYLAN play the game a moment, then he sits down on the floor next to him.

Adam's action: JOINING HIS SON.

When DYLAN realizes someone is next to him, he turns quickly to see who it is, then pauses the game and takes off his headphones.

DYLAN
How'd you get in here?

Dylan's reaction: PUTTING UP A WALL.

ADAM
I know how to open the lock, Dylan.

Adam's reaction: ESTABLISHING AUTHORITY.

DYLAN
Calling me or something?

Dylan's reaction: INTERROGATING.

ADAM
Just wanted to see how you were doing.

Adam's action: OFFERING HELP.

DYLAN
(chuckles lightly)
Is anybody doing okay around here?

Dylan's reaction: REVEALING CYNICISM.

ADAM is quiet a moment.

ADAM
Is there anything you want to talk about?

Adam's action: ENCOURAGING OPENNESS.

DYLAN
Why do you wanna talk? Everyone who comes into this house just keeps saying the same thing over and over.

Dylan's reaction: REJECTING CONSOLATION.

ADAM
They're just trying to help, son.

Adam's action: ACKNOWLEDGING SUPPORT.

DYLAN
They're not.

Dylan's reaction: REFUSING HELP.

ADAM
Dylan, we're all hurting. What we can't do is block each other out. We need each other.

Adam's action: ENCOURAGING DYLAN TO LET HIM IN.

DYLAN
You don't need me.

Dylan's reaction: SEPARATING HIMSELF FROM HIS FAMILY.

ADAM is a bit stunned.

Adam's action: TRYING TO RESPOND.

DYLAN (CONT'D)
Can I play my game now?

Dylan's reaction: MOVING ON ALONE.

ADAM shows a mixture of emotions, grappling with how to respond.

ADAM
Yes.

Adam's action: ACCEPTING DEFEAT.

ADAM gets up and walks out the door. DYLAN puts his headphones back on and resumes playing.

Dylan's reaction: REMAINING ISOLATED.

INT. MITCHELL HALLWAY – DAY

ADAM looks into Emily's room and sees VICTORIA lying on Emily's bed, sobbing.

Victoria's action: MOURNING.

ADAM stands in the hallway, not sure what to do.

Adam's reaction: DISTANCING HIMSELF.

Similarly to *The Tree of Life*, this sequence in *Courageous* also reaches a closing negative value. Surveying the beats reveals the sequence's turning points:

1. Remembering/Joining Him
2. Seeking Guidance/Offering Nothing
3. Expressing Confusion/Silently Agreeing
4. Expressing Regret/Discouraging Regret
5. Lashing Out/Trying to Find Answers
6. *Sympathizing and Expressing Regret/Encouraging Him to Lead*
7. Attempting to Connect/Shutting Everyone Out
8. Letting Himself In and Joining His Son/Putting Up a Wall
9. Establishing Authority/Interrogating
10. Offering Help/Revealing Cynicism
11. Encouraging Openness/Rejecting Consolation
12. Acknowledging Support/Refusing Help

13. Encouraging Dylan to Let Him In/Separating Himself From His Family
14. Trying to Respond/Moving On Alone
15. *Accepting Defeat/Remaining Isolated*
16. Mourning/Distancing Himself

The scene turns first when Adam realizes he must comfort and reconcile with Dylan, but a second turning point occurs when he realizes Dylan is unwilling to be consoled. Neither Dylan nor Victoria nor Adam can be relieved as they mourn the loss of Emily. Dylan has become cynical towards others, Victoria has become angry and regrets that she may have played a part in losing her daughter, and Adam is uncertain as to how to lead his home. This progression of the story towards a negative value is appropriate. However, because the darkness and regret that Adam feels leads him to finally take a step forward in his journey to become a better father.

Act Two – Inner Conflict

The Tree of Life

The second act of *The Tree of Life* begins with an extended sequence portraying the creation of the universe, interspersed with whispered narration by Mrs. O'Brien directed towards God: "Who are we to you? Answer me." The sequence continues as the point of view shifts from Mrs. O'Brien to adult Jack, as his narration tries to remember his first encounter with God: "You spoke with me... before I knew I loved you, believed in you. When did you first touch my heart?" The film then transitions to flashbacks that constitute the majority of the running time, showing newlywed Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, the birth and infancy of their sons, the boys' childhood, and finally their pre-teenage years.

The film's second act contains scenes with limited dialogue, simply showing the O'Brien family in everyday life. As the O'Brien boys react to the environment and people around them, young Jack's narration asks God questions just as his mother's does. Thus, inner conflict progresses the majority of the film. As Jack grows up, he watches his family, neighbors, and house in wonder, silently discovering how life works. As a young man, Jack tries to set time aside to pray. "Help me not to sass my dad," he mutters, kneeling by his bedside in prayer. "Help me be thankful for everything I've got." As he prays, however, his narration reveals deeper questions for God: "Where do you live? Are you watching me? I want to know what you are; I want to see what you see."

Jack's inner conflict continues through the film as he realizes the dichotomy that his father and mother represent. Mr. O'Brien teaches his sons that "it takes fierce will to get ahead in this world," and Mrs. O'Brien encourages her sons to "love everyone, every leaf, every ray of light." But Jack, viewing his father's way as cruel and his mother's way as naïve, cannot choose one over the other. Jack thus experiences personal conflict with his family as he tries to discern how

to live. However, his inner conflict prompts his personal conflict, as internally he attempts to reconcile two opposing ways of life, his father's way of nature and his mother's way of grace.

Courageous

The second act of *Courageous* begins after Adam has decided to make an effort to become a better husband and father to his grieving family. After several weeks of studying Scripture in order to create the Resolution for Men, a commitment with Biblical guidelines on taking charge of family, the Mitchell family has begun to move on from the grieving process. Adam has even begun to take steps to reach out to Dylan by going out running with him, something he was against at the beginning of the film.

The Resolution for Men to which the five fathers commit at the film's midpoint intensifies inner conflict among the characters. As the five men recite the promises of the Resolution, they make specific statements that will test them in the rest of the film's second act. Javier, for example, vows to "work diligently to provide for the needs of my family" and is later tempted at work to provide false information on a report. Nathan vows to "forgive those who have wronged me and reconcile with those who I have wronged," but he struggles to actually forgive his absent father. Shane vows to "walk in integrity as a man answerable to God" but is tempted to dishonestly make a profit at work. David also commits to these things, but his inner conflict is exposed in an earlier scene, when he reveals to Nathan that he had a daughter named Olivia out of wedlock and cannot bring himself to reconcile with his ex-girlfriend Amanda.

Although all the main characters have inner conflict that influences their decisions, that conflict is expressed primarily through dialogue, and conflict is normally resolved rather quickly. For example, when David shares his familial struggles with Nathan, Nathan shares the Gospel with David and helps him understand that he cannot reconcile with his family simply by his own efforts. Even for the Mitchell family, inner conflict was most prevalent as they mourned the loss

of Emily. Six weeks later, their lives and emotions have improved, leaving little inner conflict to progress the rest of the story.

Personal Conflict

The Tree of Life

As Jack struggles with God internally, trying to reconcile the ways of his father and mother, his frustration is manifested in his relationships with the rest of the family. The sense of wonder that Jack experienced as a child has become rebellion, disrespecting authority and attempting to become independent. Additionally, as Jack takes advantage of his mother and father, his attitude towards his brothers becomes an attempt to look better than they are, as Jack verbally and physically pushes his brothers around when they are unwilling to join him in breaking the rules.

Jack's most ambiguous relationship in the film is with his father. Jack expresses in his narration, underneath scenes of him and his brothers wrestling with Mr. O'Brien, how his father is a lying hypocrite whose attention focuses on his own interests rather than those of his family. But although Jack and his brothers occasionally get in arguments with their father, they never openly say that they hate him. In fact, the boys try to convince their father that they really do love him. When Mr. O'Brien tells Jack to give him a goodnight kiss, Jack obeys. When Jack slams a door loudly and his father makes him close it quietly fifty times, he reluctantly follows orders. But his external respect with his father is in direct opposition to his internal bitterness towards him, creating strong personal conflict.

Jack has lesser conflict with his mother than with his father, but his rebellious nature affects his treatment of her as well. Eventually, Jack decides to downright disobey his mother when she commands him. One day, after Jack ruins one of R. L.'s drawings and goes outside to pout, Mrs. O'Brien calls him back inside and Jack outright tells her he will not. "I'll do what I want," he

tells her. “What do you care? You let him walk right over you,” referring to his father’s strict treatment of her as well as his children.

Jack’s bitterness towards his parents affects his treatment of his brothers, particularly of the more quiet and obedient R. L. One day, Jack notices R. L. playing the guitar along with Mr. O’Brien playing the piano. Father and son share a moment as Jack watches silently and jealously. Later, Jack and R. L. play outside with their neighborhood friends. Jack begins to view his brother as weak because he is more hesitant to get into trouble. Jack wrestles with R. L. in the front yard one day, and R. L. does not fight back. Jack’s attitude towards his brother exemplifies strong personal conflict – while he secretly admires his brother’s kindness (similar to his mother’s), he is jealous of him and wants to be loved as much as, or more than, R. L. is.

Courageous

As the five fathers struggle internally with their desires to become better men, their conflict and frustration extends to the way they treat their wives, children, and each other. However, for all five fathers, personal conflict is usually resolved in a short amount of time, similar to the inner conflict.

Adam, in contrast to the film’s first act, has become more open with Dylan and even goes running with him, something he stated earlier that he would never do. One day, as the two run together one morning, and they stop briefly so that Adam can verbally tell Dylan his decision to follow God and his desire for Dylan to do the same. Dylan agrees, and they continue running. In this scene, the conflict between father and son is resolved.

Nathan has conflict with his family early in the film, particularly with his daughter Jade, as he and Kayla told her she could not date classmate Derek until she was older. When Derek approaches their house one day trying to take Jade out to eat, Nathan says no, adding more conflict between father and daughter. But about an hour after this event occurs in the film,

Nathan and Jade have dinner at a fancy restaurant where he asks her if she will wait to start dating, when she is older and has found a Godly man to date. She agrees, and to commemorate the night, Nathan gives Jade a purity ring. This conflict is resolved in a singular scene that comes an hour in screen time after the conflict began.

For Javier and his family, not only is there conflict in the first act when he struggles to find a job, but there is also conflict after he finds a new job at a factory. When approached about a promotion, he is asked to run a preliminary shift in another department and fill out a form about a shipment – reporting false information. Javier goes home that night and talks to Carmen about the situation, and neither can decide what to do. Javier knows he cannot lie; however, Carmen knows that this promotion is a way to provide for their family and Javier cannot pass it up. Their family and their future are at risk now, as is their opportunity to remain in the country. Although the situation is resolved a few scenes later, the stakes are high, making the conflict strong.

David's personal conflict with Amanda and Olivia is present in the film but only because David mentions it verbally to Nathan. After committing to the Resolution for Men, David sends Amanda a letter in an attempt to reconcile. In short montages later in the film, David and Amanda sit in a café having (inaudible) conversation, and eventually, David arrives at Amanda's house to see Olivia.

Shane's personal conflict with his family is also given very limited screen time. His ex-wife is only mentioned in dialogue, and only in one montage in the middle of the film is Shane seen with his son Tyler at a restaurant, laughing and making (inaudible) conversation. Shane's personal conflict with Adam is much stronger, especially at the film's low point when Adam catches Shane in the act of stealing drugs from evidence. The two men, having been partners on the police force, have a strong relationship, and the stakes for their reconciliation become higher when that relationship is tested.

Scene Analysis – Family Dinner*The Tree of Life*

To analyze the specific relationships in the film between brothers, parents, and father and son, this scene analysis focuses on a moment in the middle of the film where the O'Brien family eats lunch together and an argument ensues. This moment presents a turning point in the tension between the parents and the children. The conflict in this scene involves Jack and R. L. finally expressing hate for their father, who in turn expresses distrust of his wife. The opening values at stake are Mr. O'Brien's authority, Mrs. O'Brien's grace, and the sons' love for their father.

INT. KITCHEN - O'BRIEN HOUSE

The O'BRIEN FAMILY is dressed nice on an afternoon, eating lunch together. MUSIC plays from the record player.

MR. O'BRIEN

(to R. L.)

Can you do something for me? You promise you'll do it without having to ask what it is? Just have the confidence that what your father asks of you is right?

Mr. O'Brien's action: PRESSURING R. L. TO OBEY.

R. L.

Yes, sir.

R. L.'s reaction: RESPONDING RESPECTFULLY.

MR. O'BRIEN

For the next half hour, will you not speak unless you have something important to say?

Mr. O'Brien's action: COMMANDING R. L.

MR. O'BRIEN continues eating, as does MRS. O'BRIEN. R. L. looks at his father, and then continues eating.

R. L.'s reaction: QUIETLY RESUMING.

MR. O'BRIEN (CONT'D)

(to STEVE)

What'd you do today, my fine feathered friend? Sit on the front two inches of your chair. Better for your posture. I read that in the paper.

Mr. O'Brien's action: COMMANDING STEVE.

STEVE adjusts his seat.

Steve's reaction: RESPECTFULLY OBEYING.

LATER

Still at the table, MR. O'BRIEN is holding a rock that JACK had.

MR. O'BRIEN (CONT'D)
Did you actually buy this from Mr.
Ledbetter? Don't explain. Just nod - yes or
no.

Mr. O'Brien's action: INQUIRING.

JACK shakes his head, not looking at his father.

MR. O'BRIEN (CONT'D)
Hmm?

JACK
No.

Jack's reaction: RESPONDING NEGATIVELY.

R. L.
(to MR. O'BRIEN)
Be quiet.

R. L.'s action: COMMANDING HIS FATHER.

MR. O'BRIEN stops eating and looks at R. L. MRS. O'BRIEN looks up too.

MR. O'BRIEN
(to R. L.)
What did you say?

Mr. O'Brien's reaction: DEMANDING.

R. L.
(pause)
Please.

R. L.'s action: REPEATING.

Suddenly, MR. O'BRIEN stands up and grabs R. L. by the collar,
standing him up. Chaos ensues.

Mr. O'Brien's reaction: ATTACKING HIS SON.

JACK
Leave him alone!

Jack's action: PROTECTING R. L.

MR. O'BRIEN
(to R. L.)
Come here!

Mr. O'Brien's reaction: COMMANDING R. L.

MRS. O'BRIEN
Honey!

Mrs. O'Brien's action: TRYING TO CALM MR. O'BRIEN DOWN.

The MUSIC abruptly stops. MRS. O'BRIEN holds R. L. back while MR. O'BRIEN takes JACK to a nearby closet, shoves him in, points at him, and closes the door.

Mr. O'Brien's reaction: PUNISHING JACK.

MR. O'BRIEN
(to R. L.)
Come here!
(to STEVE)
Get back.
(to R. L.)
Come here!

Mr. O'Brien's action: PUNISHING R. L.

As MRS. O'BRIEN holds STEVE, MR. O'BRIEN grabs R. L. by the shirt and drags him away from the kitchen. MRS. O'BRIEN holds STEVE up in her arms and he cries.

Mrs. O'Brien's reaction: CALMING STEVE.

MR. O'BRIEN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(to R. L.)
Get up there!

MR. O'BRIEN noisily moves the furniture around as he sits back at the table and continues to eat.

Mr. O'Brien's action: RESUMING MEAL.

MRS. O'BRIEN looks at him, and then carries STEVE away.

Mrs. O'Brien's reaction: CARRYING STEVE AWAY.

Inside the closet, Jack has turned the light on, then suddenly turns it on.

Jack's action/reaction: TURNING ON LIGHT/STAYING IN DARKNESS.

MRS. O'BRIEN returns to the kitchen and starts putting away dishes and washing them. MR. O'BRIEN stands in the kitchen, watching her as she works.

Mrs. O'Brien's action: RESUMING IN KITCHEN.

MR. O'BRIEN (CONT'D)
You turned my own kids against me. You
undermine everything I do.

Mr. O'Brien's reaction: INTERROGATING HIS WIFE.

MOMENTS LATER

MRS. and MR. O'BRIEN stand face-to-face in the kitchen. Suddenly, she puts her hand in his face.

MRS. O'BRIEN
How do you like it--

Mrs. O'Brien's action: ATTACKING HER HUSBAND.

MR. O'BRIEN
Stop it-- stop it!

Mr. O'Brien's reaction: DEFENDING HIMSELF.

They wrestle until MR. O'BRIEN has his wife pinned against the sink. MRS. O'BRIEN starts crying softly.

MR. O'BRIEN (CONT'D)
Stop it. Stop. Stop.

Slowly, MR. O'BRIEN lets go of MRS. O'BRIEN, whose arms lower.

Mr. O'Brien's action: PUTTING HIS WIFE IN HER PLACE.

MOMENTS LATER

MRS. O'BRIEN is alone in the kitchen, trying to work as she cries.

Mrs. O'Brien's reaction: CRYING.

The scene ends with a closing value in the negative for each character. Surveying the beats indicates the scene's turning point:

1. Pressuring R. L. to Obey/Responding Respectfully
2. Commanding R. L./Quietly Resuming
3. Commanding Steve/Respectfully Obeying
4. Inquiring/Responding Negatively
5. *Commanding His Father/Demanding*

6. Repeating/Attacking His Son
7. Protecting R. L./Commanding R. L.
8. Trying to Calm Mr. O'Brien Down/Punishing Jack
9. Punishing R. L./Calming Steve
10. Resuming Meal/Carrying Steve Away
11. Turning On Light/Staying in Darkness
12. Resuming in Kitchen/Interrogating His Wife
13. Attacking Her Husband/Defending Himself
14. Putting His Wife in Her Place/Crying

Mr. O'Brien's commanding attitude towards his sons creates in them an opening value of bitterness. However, the turning point occurs when R. L. tells his father to be quiet. The boys' disdain for their father is now exposed. The stakes for the relationship between Mr. O'Brien and his sons are much higher, increasing the personal conflict to be resolved by the end of the film.

Courageous

To analyze specific relationships in the film between parent and child, this scene analysis focuses on a moment where the Mitchell family eats dinner one night, shortly before Adam introduces the Resolution for Men to his colleagues. This moment presents a turning point in the relationship between the parents and their son. Adam has just shared a humorous anecdote from that day at work. The conflict in this scene is for Adam, Victoria, and Dylan to finally move on from their time of grieving. The opening values at stake in this scene are the family's contentment and love for each other.

INT. DINING ROOM - MITCHELL HOUSE

ADAM, VICTORIA, and DYLAN are eating dinner as Adam finishes his story. They are laughing hard.

Family's action: LAUGHING.

ADAM

Oh, it was the funniest thing I have ever seen! I've never seen somebody so anxious to get to jail.

Adam's reaction: MAKING A JOKE.

VICTORIA
Oh, he is so crazy.

Victoria's action: COMMENTING ON STORY.

ADAM
The guys like him. We've kind of adopted
him into our group.

Adam's reaction: PRAISING JAVIER.

Victoria thinks a moment.

VICTORIA
I mean, I still can't believe that Carmen
brought us three meals after the funeral. I
mean, that was so sweet.

Victoria's action: SHARING GRATITUDE.

ADAM looks down a moment, thinking about the day. He then looks at
VICTORIA.

Adam's reaction: REFLECTING.

ADAM
I had a good day today.

Adam's action: ENCOURAGING ABOUT THE DAY.

VICTORIA studies his face, realizing that it has been a while since
they have felt that way. She smiles.

Victoria's reaction: BONDING WITH HER HUSBAND.

Adam then turns to DYLAN with tender eyes.

ADAM (CONT'D)
You all right, buddy?

Adam's action: CHECKING UP ON HIS SON.

DYLAN stares at him a moment, realizing the question goes deeper than
the surface. He nods.

Dylan's reaction: QUIETLY ASSURING.

ADAM (CONT'D)
We're gonna be okay, aren't we?

Adam's action: ASSURING HIS FAMILY.

He looks back at VICTORIA, who also realizes what he's asking.

Victoria's reaction: TRUSTING HER HUSBAND.

ADAM (CONT'D)
We're gonna be all right.

Adam's action: REASSURING FAMILY.

They are quiet a moment.

Family's reaction: SILENTLY REFLECTING.

Then DYLAN gets teary-eyed.

DYLAN
I wish I would have been a better brother.

Dylan's action: SHARING GUILT.

Both ADAM and VICTORIA stare at him, not expecting his confession. Suddenly, DYLAN breaks, and tears start pouring from his eyes.

Dylan's reaction: CRYING REMORSEFULLY.

ADAM and VICTORIA find themselves crying too, and both of them get up and embrace DYLAN. ADAM holds him and talks in his ear.

ADAM
(quietly)
It's all right.

Adam and Victoria's action: COMFORTING THEIR SON.

DYLAN
(quietly)
I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Dylan's reaction: APOLOGIZING.

ADAM
Hey, I love you, buddy. You are my son. And I'm proud of you. Don't you ever forget that, okay? Don't you ever forget that.

Adam's action: AFFIRMING HIS SON.

VICTORIA
(crying)
It's okay. It's okay.

They cry together.

Family's reaction: MOURNING TOGETHER.

Surveying the beats indicates the scene's turning point:

1. Laughing/Making a Joke
2. Commenting on Story/Praising Javier
3. Sharing Gratitude/Reflecting
4. Encouraging About the Day/Bonding with Her Husband
5. Checking Up on His Son/Quietly Assuring
6. Assuring His Family/Trusting Her Husband
7. Reassuring Family/Silently Reflecting
8. *Sharing Guilt/Crying Remorsefully*
9. Comforting Their Son/Apologizing
10. Affirming His Son/Mourning Together

The scene turns when Dylan finally opens up to his parents and acknowledges his failure as a brother. However, unlike the scene analyzed in *The Tree of Life* when a family meal ends in a negative closing value, this scene at a similar midpoint ends in a positive closing value, as Dylan, Adam, and Victoria finally reconcile and move on from their grief. The personal conflict in this scene is not intensified – it is nearly resolved.

Extra-personal Conflict

The Tree of Life

As Jack experiences a growing rebellion and loss of innocence, his conflict becomes one with society at large, not just with his own family. For example, in one scene, Mrs. O'Brien takes her sons with her shopping, and while in town, they notice policemen arresting a few men for some crime. Jack watches the officers handcuff the criminals and put them in their vehicles. He wonders: "Can it happen to anyone?" His childlike innocence is beginning to fade away as he sees wrongdoing and punishment.

When their father is away on a business trip, the O'Brien boys play with other boys their age from the neighborhood. As the boys begin destroying property, Jack is conflicted about whether or not his parents would agree with this. His friend, however, encourages him that his parents are

irrelevant: “They’re just trying to scare you, keep you ignorant. They say you can’t try stuff? They do.” Jack’s rebellious nature towards authority continues even at school, as he teases other students in his class while his teacher gives a test. Jack’s rebellion serves as extra-personal conflict that drives the tense personal conflict between him and his family as well as the inner conflict he faces as he decides to do wrong.

Courageous

As Adam, David, Nathan, and Shane serve on the city police force, they encounter conflict firsthand as they serve the community and punish wrongdoing. There are three sequences in the film where one or more of the officers chase after criminals, usually catching them, that represent the policemen’s overall struggle with crime in their environment. However, because these sequences are spread out in the film, the criminals seem less of a threat.

However, at the beginning of the film, when the four policemen listen at a meeting where the sheriff shares statistics on prevalent crime from fatherless homes, the extra-personal conflict becomes even more relevant. As Adam writes the Resolution for Men, he tells his fellow officers and Javier he wants to be a better father not only to please God (satisfying inner conflict) and his family (satisfying personal conflict), but also to set an example for the rest of society (satisfying extra-personal conflict). “Half the fathers in this country are already failing,” Adam tells the other men, “and I don’t want to be one of them.”

Points of No Return

The Tree of Life

Certain scenes in *The Tree of Life* when Jack observes events in his life that contribute to his loss of innocence are Points of No Return in his journey. In these moments, Jack realizes he cannot return to his childish ignorance and must face the hardships of life.

The first Point of No Return for young Jack occurs when his family goes swimming at the community pool one summer day. Jack, R. L., and Steve join other boys their age in the water, but as they swim, one of the boys named Tyler stops swimming and floats facedown in the water. The lifeguard blows his whistle and jumps in the water, as does Tyler's father. They bring Tyler out of the water, and his mother cries for him as Mr. O'Brien tries to resuscitate him. Jack watches all of this silently, and his silence continues into the next scene as his family attends Tyler's funeral.

Earlier in the film, Jack asked God deep but innocent questions such as, "Where do you live? Are you watching me?" But after Tyler's death, his prayers start to become bitter. "Was he bad? Where were you?" Briefly, there are images of another friend of Jack's whose head is burned after his house caught on fire. Jack continues to whisper to God, and these questions mark a turning point for Jack and his rebellious nature: "You let a boy die. You'd let anything happen. Why should I be good if you aren't?"

One day, he sneaks into his neighbor's house when she is not home and looks around at her things. In her bedroom, Jack opens up his neighbor's dresser drawer, looking at her clothes. He finds a white dress, takes it out, and looks at it. But after hearing several sounds as if someone is coming back into the house, Jack sneaks out with the dress and throws it into a river. Jack returns home, unable to look his mother in the eye. This Point of No Return is the first time that Jack strongly feels remorse for his actions: he whispers, "What have I started? What have I done?" Jack's inner conflict has returned, and he can no longer blindly follow his rebellious friends – he longs to be innocent once again.

Courageous

Several moments in *Courageous* when Adam, Shane, Nathan, David, and Javier make decisions that impact themselves and their families, for better or worse, are Points of No Return

in their journeys. Through the multiple subplots occurring throughout the film, each man has his own moments where he must choose between integrity and dishonesty, between forgiveness and bitterness, unable to look back once the decision is made.

The Point of No Return that unites the five families together is the ceremony where the fathers commit to the Resolution for Men. Nathan's mentor William Barrett leads the ceremony, encouraging the five fathers that this public commitment is important, but also warning them that following through with the commitment will require much courage.

As the film continues, each father finds himself tested to stay true to the Resolution. David finally takes the initiative to reconcile with Amanda and Olivia, although he does not know what Amanda's response will be. Nathan finally reconciles with his father, even though he never knew him and felt bitterness for him being absent in his life. Javier, at the risk of losing his job, stays true to his integrity and does not provide false information on a report – which leads to him getting the promotion.

Adam must decide whether or not to investigate on suspicious activity within his unit when he realizes that evidence has been tampered with, risking the respectability of the department. When Adam finally takes action, he finds Shane, who has struggled to maintain his own integrity rather than finding illegal ways to make a profit – and because Shane has failed, the story reaches its lowest point.

Low Point

The Tree of Life

One day, Jack and R. L. ride their bicycles into the woods and start shooting at animals with a BB gun. Jack excitedly shoots at animals in the distance and in the water, while R. L. is much more hesitant. Finally, Jack takes the gun and tells R. L. to put his finger overtop of it. After

hesitating, R. L. finally agrees. Jack fires the gun, and R. L. screams and runs away, whimpering in pain. Jack then walks by himself through the woods with a blank expression on his face.

This turning point in Jack's journey is also his lowest. In this moment, Jack faces the contrast between the way of nature and the way of grace stronger than ever before. Although the way of nature has convinced him that 'might makes right,' his efforts to seem tougher than everyone else have led to him hurting his brother. Now, Jack desires forgiveness and the way of grace. In a later scene, as he walks through an old, abandoned cabin with other boys in the neighborhood (including R. L., who keeps himself as he runs his hand through the light coming in the window), Jack's narration whispers: "What I want to do, I can't do. I do what I hate."

Courageous

One day at the police station, Shane is asked to take some drugs in small bags to the evidence room. When Shane arrives at evidence and sees no else there, he takes some of the pouches of drugs out of the bags and into his pocket. Suddenly, Adam walks in and interrogates him, followed later by Nathan. Feeling cornered, Shane gets defensive and says that his salary as an officer is not enough. Shane also claims that Adam would do the same in his position. Adam angrily comes back at Shane, reminding him of his commitment to the Resolution. Nathan calms Adam down, and finally other officers enter the room, handcuff Shane, and lead him out. "This is a mistake," shouts Shane. "You're going to burn us all! Is that really what you want?" Once Shane is gone, Nathan puts his hand on Adam's shoulder and reminds him: "We all agreed, Adam. We are doubly accountable."

The high stakes and negative outcome indicate this scene as the film's low point. Adam now faces the most serious conflict he has faced since Emily's death, whether to have his friend arrested or to prevent the arrest. Shane's conflict is to either maintain integrity or break the law. By the time Adam catches him, his conflict has already been lost. In this moment, Adam and

Shane's relationship is most intensified. When Shane is taken away, he and Adam are not on good terms, even after Nathan encourages Adam about staying true to his commitment.

Scene Analysis – Reconciliation

The Tree of Life

To analyze the progression of *The Tree of Life* into the third act with reconciliation between characters, this moment has been selected for scene analysis. The conflict in this scene is for Jack to make amends with R. L. after harming him with the BB gun. The opening value at stake is Jack and R. L.'s friendship and brotherly love for each other.

INT. R. L.'S BEDROOM - O'BRIEN HOUSE

R. L. sits in his bedroom. JACK comes over with a small fan and blows the wind in his face.

Jack's action: ANNOYING.

R. L. doesn't respond.

R. L.'s reaction: IGNORING.

JACK turns the fan off and puts his fingers on R. L.'s cheeks in order to form a smile. JACK then kisses R. L.'s elbow.

Jack's action: TRYING TO CHEER HIM UP.

R. L., holding a large pinecone, wipes off the area that JACK kissed. JACK kisses it again, and R. L. wipes it again.

R. L.'s reaction: NOT BEING AMUSED.

JACK takes a small block of wood nearby and hands it to R. L.

JACK
You can hit me if you want.

Jack's action: LETTING HIM GET REVENGE.

R. L. takes the wood and looks at it for a moment. He then pretends as if he's about to hit JACK with it, but he doesn't. Instead, he runs his hand along the wood.

R. L.'s reaction: REFUSING TO FIGHT BACK.

JACK (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. You're my brother.

Jack's action: APOLOGIZING.

JACK and R. L. look at each other. R. L. again pretends like he's going to hit JACK, but he doesn't. They just grin at each other.

R. L.'s reaction: SILENTLY FORGIVING.

MOMENTS LATER

R. L. stands before JACK, who's now seated on the bed where R. L. was. R. L. puts his hand on JACK's folded hands, then his shoulder, and then his head.

R. L.'s action: BLESSING HIS BROTHER.

JACK only looks up at R. L.

Jack's reaction: WONDERING WHY.

Surveying the beats indicates the scene's turning point:

1. Annoying/Ignoring
2. Trying to Cheer Him Up/Not Being Amused
3. Letting Him Get Revenge/Refusing to Fight Back
4. *Apologizing/Silently Forgiving*
5. Blessing His Brother/Wondering Why

The closing value of this scene ends in the positive as R. L. silently refuses to fight back and instead forgives Jack. This moment is where the scene turns, as Jack finally becomes vulnerable with his brother but in return receives grace. Later, as Jack and R. L. play in the front yard, Jack's narration reveals that he is convinced that the way of grace his brother has shown him can only be divine: "What was it you showed me? I didn't know how to name you then, but I see it was you. Always you were calling me." This reconciliation between brothers carries into Jack's attitude towards his parents, as he sees his father in the front yard and willingly joins him.

In the following scenes leading into the third act, Mr. O'Brien is let go from his factory position, forcing him to take another job in another location. Jack, R. L., and Steve cry about having to move away. However, they cry together, all three having reconciled. Jack even reconciles with his father, who embraces him and says, "You're all I have. You're all I want to

have.” As the family moves away, and Mrs. O’Brien’s narration reflects on the nature of grace once again (“Unless you love,” she says, “your life will flash by”), there is closure because the family has been reconciled. This brings the narrative back to Mrs. O’Brien years later and Jack as an adult, as they seek closure once again after the death of R. L.

Courageous

To analyze the progression of *Courageous* into the third act with reconciliation between characters, the moment below has been selected for scene analysis. The conflict in this scene is for Adam and Shane to make amends, as Adam goes to see Shane in prison. The opening value at stake is the two men’s friendship, in addition to the well-being of Shane’s son Tyler. As Adam enters the prison, he realizes that Shane’s relationship with both him and his son is at stake.

INT. PRISON VISITING ROOM – DAY

ADAM is let into a cellblock and into a visiting room. He takes a seat in front of one of the glass windows. He looks up, and SHANE is led into the room on the other side of the glass and sits down.

ADAM

Hey, Shane.

Adam’s action: GREETING.

SHANE

I can’t tell you what it’s like to be on this side of the glass.

Shane’s reaction: ACKNOWLEDGING HIS SURROUNDINGS.

ADAM

Shane, I’m sorry.

Adam’s action: SHARING HIS GRIEF.

SHANE

Don’t apologize. I knew what I was doing. I guess somewhere along the way, I let go of the wheel.

SHANE starts to get emotional.

SHANE (CONT'D)

Now I can't get it back even if I wanted to.

Shane's reaction: ACKNOWLEDGING HIS MISTAKE.

ADAM

Shane, you've got to get right with God first. Then, you've got to get right with your son.

Adam's action: REMINDING SHANE TO RECONCILE.

SHANE

(crying)

I've lost him, Adam.

Shane's reaction: ADMITTING DESPAIR.

ADAM

No. You haven't lost him. He's hurting, but you haven't lost him.

Adam's action: SHARING HOPE.

SHANE looks up at ADAM and leans forward.

SHANE

You have to help me with Tyler. He needs someone to look out for him.

Shane's reaction: ASKING FOR HELP.

ADAM ponders this.

ADAM

I'll look after him. You have my word.

Adam's action: PROMISING TO HELP.

SHANE

I don't want him to be like me. Adam. I'm sorry. Forgive me, please.

Shane's reaction: ASKING FOR ANOTHER CHANCE.

ADAM

I forgive you. Listen, I'll come see you again, all right?

Adam's action: FORGIVING.

SHANE

Okay.

ADAM gets up.

SHANE (CONT'D)

Hey. Don't let go of the wheel.

Shane's reaction: REMINDING ADAM TO STAY TRUE.

ADAM

Never.

Adam's action: PROMISING TO STAY TRUE.

SHANE cries as ADAM opens the door and walks out.

Shane's reaction: CRYING.

Surveying the beats indicates the scene's turning point:

1. Greeting/Acknowledging His Surroundings
2. Sharing His Grief/Acknowledging His Mistake
3. Reminding Shane to Reconcile/Admitting Despair
4. Sharing Hope/Asking for Help
5. *Promising to Help/Asking for Another Chance*
6. Forgiving/Reminding Adam to Stay True
7. Promising to Stay True/Crying

The scene turns when Shane finally asks forgiveness, and when Adam agrees to help him by looking after Tyler. Here, Shane is able to reconcile with Adam, bringing the scene's closing value into the positive. Shane is repentant for his actions, especially because he has realized that they have affected his son. However, asking forgiveness from Adam brings closure and even hope to his situation. This moment of reconciliation brings closure to the narrative before the third act, occurring immediately after this scene as Adam, Nathan, and David get into a final shootout with the thugs from earlier in the film.

Act Three – Climax and Resolution

The Tree of Life

The third act of *The Tree of Life* transitions to the points of view of Mrs. O'Brien after she has received news of R. L.'s death and adult Jack as he searches for meaning in his workplace. However, rather than showing the characters in their real-life environments, similar to the first act, the climax instead portrays the O'Brien family in a fantasy sequence similar to that which opened the second act, the creation of the universe. The Climax becomes a dreamlike sequence combining images of nature and the characters reuniting together in an unidentified time and location. While the Climax is ambiguous and lacks much dialogue, the O'Brien family receives closure and reconciliation here.

A montage of images reveals outer space as adult Jack's narration is briefly heard, possibly indicating the time period in which the following sequence takes place: "Keep us, guide us, till the end of time." Another whisper later is heard from young Jack: "Follow me," and in a series of shots of adult Jack in a desert, his younger self leads him through the rocky landscape, intercut with shots of unidentified architecture and a woman awaking from her bed wearing a wedding dress.

Finally, adult Jack finds himself on a beach with dozens of people, several of whom he knows – including his own family. Young women in robes guide him and others along the beach, including the young boy from Jack's childhood who was scarred by a house fire. Young Steve, who looks just as Jack remembers him from his childhood, watches seagulls flying overhead and begins waving his arms around, imitating their motion.

Then, Jack finds his mother, who also looks as she did when he was a child. Mrs. O'Brien looks at her eldest son and embraces him. Later, Jack walks along the beach with his father, putting a hand on his shoulder before Mr. O'Brien returns the gesture. Finally, R. L. appears, also in his young form, and adult Jack carries him along the beach to his parents. Mr. O'Brien

picks up his son, holds him in the air, and lovingly embraces him. When Mrs. O'Brien approaches, Mr. O'Brien puts R. L. down so his mother can approach him. As Steve briefly watches, Mrs. O'Brien strokes R. L.'s face and kisses him. She embraces her son and kisses her husband as others also gather along the beach.

Suddenly, the scene transitions to a snowy landscape where Mrs. O'Brien, R. L., adult Jack, and others are walking around. Briefly, the O'Brien's walk through a replica of their old house until Mrs. O'Brien opens the front door, kisses R. L., and leads him outside. R. L. walks in circles for a while, rubbing his hands together, as Mrs. O'Brien reaches out her hand for him. R. L. holds her hand briefly, lets go, and continues walking into the distance. Jack stands behind his mother, stroking her hair. Later, Mrs. O'Brien herself walks out into the distance, raising her hands as she steps forward.

Suddenly, the narrative transitions to another location, only bright white light under which stands Mrs. O'Brien and two younger women, one of whom is Mrs. O'Brien's own self as a child who appeared at the beginning of the film. The women touch and move Mrs. O'Brien's hands slowly, on and then away from her eyes, as if dancing with her. Finally, Mrs. O'Brien, with eyes closed and a faint smile, whispers onscreen: "I give him to you. I give you my son." Mrs. O'Brien cups her hands together, raises them above her head, and separates them. The sequence ends with a shot of a field of dandelions, possibly the same field seen at the beginning of the film on young Mrs. O'Brien's farm.

Just then, the sequence transitions to present-day at adult Jack's workplace, as an elevator descends down a skyscraper. Jack stands in the middle of a field among the skyscrapers, looking around his environment as if he is seeing this place for the first time. As he looks around, there is the slightest sign of a smile on his face. With some final images of skyscrapers, a large bridge above a river, and the forming light in darkness that opened the film, *The Tree of Life* concludes.

In this dreamlike sequence, the film reaches its Climax as well as its Resolution rather quickly. Searching through unknown landscapes, visually representing his internal searching for meaning and reconciliation in his life, Jack eventually finds his family as he remembers them from his youth. Jack's experience as a young man, as well as his narration and prayers to God, indicated that he saw and felt something divine in his life through the way of grace shown by his mother and brother. However, R. L.'s death left him cynical and bitter towards life. In this sequence, Jack realizes the way of grace is not only a way to live in the present but also a gateway to eternity. Here, he sees his family as he remembers them and can finally reconcile with them all. Jack's resolution occurs as he finds comfort in the hope that he will see his brother and the rest of his family once again.

Mrs. O'Brien similarly finds her resolution as she reunites with her family in this sequence. In the film's first act, as she mourned the death of R. L., she asked God why he had to die and if she did something wrong to deserve this pain. The second act showed her life in flashback, from the creation of the world to the birth and youth of her children. In this third act, Mrs. O'Brien sees her family again in a place representing eternity, as she sees her husband and children as she remembers them from years before. When she finally has to let young R. L. go into the distance by himself, she finds comfort in the fact that he is in a better place. Remembering a life beyond her life on Earth, she finally is able to surrender R. L. – and herself – completely to God.

Courageous

The third act of *The Tree of Life* re-introduces Derrick and the thugs he works with into the narrative. The policemen's struggle with these men is about to end once and for all, and through this, Adam, Nathan, and David will be reminded of the importance of fatherhood and mentorship.

Derrick joins the thugs after school and learns they have a new stash of drugs to sell. Suddenly, Nathan and David follow them in their police car and pull them over for a blown tail light. Because the thugs cannot risk being caught with drugs, the driver pulls the vehicle over and gets out a gun, prepared to kill the officer who approaches him. Derrick realizes that Nathan is the driver, and because he does not want Jade's father to get hurt, he discourages the driver from using his gun. When Nathan approaches the thugs' vehicle, the driver fires, but Derrick prevents him from shooting Nathan.

A shootout ensues between the thugs and the police, as Nathan and David call Adam for backup after wounding the thugs. The thugs keep shooting, except for Derrick, who hides from the firing. Finally, after Adam arrives, the two thugs see a little girl watching the action from her front yard far away. Intending to use her as leverage, the thugs chase after her, and Adam and Nathan pursue them.

While Adam and Nathan pull the thugs away from the girl, whose father comes out of his house to rescue her, more officers arrive and save Adam and Nathan from getting beaten by the thugs. The thugs are arrested along with Derrick, whom Nathan approaches and interrogates about why he is with these criminals. Derrick tearfully responds that he has nobody else, and Nathan puts a hand on his shoulder. Meanwhile, Adam calls Victoria to let her know that he is okay after he thanks David for his work. "You're not a rookie anymore," he tells him.

Days later at church, Adam's pastor has Adam, Nathan, David, and Javier stand with him at the pulpit, as the pastor has been preaching the previous weeks on fatherhood. The pastor introduces Adam, who shares a word on his family's experience in the previous few months with Emily's death, which prompted him to reconsider his role as a leader of his home. As Adam shares statistics revealing the importance of a father in a family, he vulnerably promises to lead his home with integrity, respect, and the love of God.

“Some men will hear this and agree with it,” says Adam, “but have no resolve to live it out. Instead, they will live for themselves and waste the opportunity to leave a Godly legacy for the next generation.” Overtop of this dialogue is an image of Shane, sitting alone in his prison cell. However, Adam continues to preach underneath images of David greeting Amanda and Olivia at their home, Javier reading the Bible to his family, and Nathan reading Scripture to his family at home and even Derrick in prison. Adam says, “There are some men, who, regardless of the mistakes we’ve made in the past, regardless of what our fathers did not do for us, will give the strength of our arms and the rest of our days to loving God with all that we are, and to teach our children to do the same – and, whenever possible, to love and mentor others who have no father in their lives.”

Adam’s message concludes with an explicit call to action. “You don’t have to ask who will guide my family,” he says, “because by God’s grace, I will....So where are you, men of courage? It’s time to rise up and answer the call God has given you, and to say, ‘I will! I will! I will!’” As Adam says this with a hand held up high, men in the congregation begin to stand one-by-one, agreeing with the call to action. With this call, *Courageous* concludes.

The film’s Climax is an exciting, action-packed way to bring the film to a close. However, only three of the five main father characters appear, and the scene’s conflict focuses not on the relationship between father and son but that between authority and crime. The Climax brings Adam, Nathan, and David to a point of closure in their line of work but not in their families – that conflict was resolved in previous scenes.

By referencing and visually representing each of the five fathers, however, the film’s Resolution brings closure to the variations the film presents on the theme of fatherhood. Shane represents the consequences of a commitment to fatherhood broken. David represents a father who returns to the family he abandoned in order to reconcile the past. Nathan represents a father who acts not just as a leader to his own family but also as a mentor to a young man with no

family, just as he had when he was a youth. Javier represents a father who shows integrity and faith in God despite troublesome circumstances. Adam represents a father who intentionally takes time to spend with his son and, similar to Nathan, takes time to mentor young men like Tyler who need someone in the role of a father.

The Resolution sums up the film's message, although in addition to the visual representation of each of the five fathers, the sequence is basically a sermon as Adam solely addresses a congregation about what he has learned through the film. However, by the end of the film, although not all of the characters' situations are perfect, such as Shane's or Derrick's, relationships have been reconciled. There is now closure to the conflict of these men becoming better fathers.

Premise and Controlling Idea

To summarize the story and the characters' journeys in both *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, this analysis closes with a proposed Premise and Controlling Idea for both films based on Robert McKee's guidelines. The film's premise is a "what-if" statement based on the Inciting Incident and the event or events that set the characters on their journey. The Controlling Idea is formed once the journey is complete, conflict is resolved, and a lesson has been learned. For both *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, the Premise could be considered thus: What would happen if a parent lost a child and subsequently questioned God?

In *The Tree of Life*, the journey for the O'Brien family begins with the death of R. L. This tragedy makes Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien question God and their own parenting, as they ask themselves and God what they could have done differently to prevent this and why God let this tragedy happen.

In *Courageous*, the journey for Adam Mitchell, his family, and the four other fathers and their families around him starts with the death of Emily. The tragedy forces Adam and Victoria to

question God about why He could let this happen to their family. Furthermore, Adam asks himself what he could have done and could do differently in the future to be a better husband and father.

Both films also deal ultimately with the reconciliation of family. The Controlling Idea for *The Tree of Life* could be considered thus: Family is reconciled when we surrender our past failures. In order for Mrs. O'Brien and adult Jack to find closure in the death of R. L., they remember their entire lives and how the ways of nature and grace affected their decisions, their treatment of each other, and their attitude towards God. Ultimately, as they reflect on eternity and the hope they have that they will see R. L. again, both Mrs. O'Brien and Jack learn to surrender the past: Mrs. O'Brien lets her son go, and Jack reconciles with his father.

The Controlling Idea for *Courageous* could be considered thus: Family is reconciled when fathers commit to taking a stand to leadership. This idea is manifested in the Mitchell family as Adam repairs his relationship with Dylan. Nathan's family experiences this when he repairs his relationship with Jade. Javier's family is reconciled because Javier took a stand for integrity and thus was successful at his workplace. David's family is reconciled because David took initiative to contact those he hurt in the past and make amends. Even Shane's family has the hope of being reconciled because Shane realized he needed to get right with God and Tyler after his wrongdoing.

Results Overview

Act One

In *Story*, Robert McKee claimed setting up a story involves the delivery of exposition, “the information about setting, biography, and characterization that the audience needs to know to follow and comprehend the events of the story.” McKee added that exposition must first further conflict, and secondly convey information. “The anxious novice reverses that order, putting expositional duty ahead of dramatic necessity.”²

The first act of *The Tree of Life* establishes a quiet, contemplative tone for the story and the film as a whole. Information is delivered about the characters, the setting, and even the spiritual aspect of the story. However, dialogue is sparse, replaced by voice-over narration that does not convey information so much as reveal the thoughts of the main characters towards God. Mrs. O’Brien’s opening narration establishes her religious upbringing, a conflict between nature and grace that will develop throughout the story, and her spiritual commitment to God. This opening presents the information necessary for the audience to know before the occurrence of the Inciting Incident.

Todd McCarthy of the *Hollywood Reporter* noted the film’s subtle delivery of information in his review of *The Tree of Life*: “Working in a manner diametrically opposed to that of theater dramatists inclined to spell everything out, Malick opens cracks and wounds by inflection, indirection, and implication.”³ This criticism is accurate because the film does not explain much exposition. Plot elements, such as Mrs. O’Brien’s religious upbringing or the parallels between her and Mr. O’Brien and the ways of nature and grace, are hinted at visually with few words. However, Roger Moore of the *Orlando Sentinel* also pointed out the downside of the film’s subtlety, calling the film “cryptic” and noting, “Names aren’t freely given and we must work out relationships on our own.”⁴ Indeed, most character names – including the O’Brien’s surname –

are not revealed in *The Tree of Life* until the end credits. Consequentially, viewers may be disorientated because of the lack of information and thus feel disconnected from the narrative.

The first act of *Courageous* establishes several different tones, characters, and storylines that will develop throughout the entire narrative. Action sequences between the policemen and criminals create tension and extra-personal conflict between the law and crime. Domestic scenes featuring characters within a family together at home create personal conflict between parent and child to be explored throughout the film. These scenes between characters also relay information to the audience about character backgrounds and situations, primarily through dialogue. This delivery of exposition provides information for all five father characters and their families, building up to the film's Inciting Incident.

However, *Courageous*, contrary to McKee's guideline to dramatize exposition, conveys information primarily through dialogue. These scenes reveal conflict and character in a straightforward manner. Tom Russo from the *Boston Globe* acknowledged these scenes become "narrative-suffocating devices for stressing a point."⁵ For example, Victoria acknowledges Adam's faults in parenting Dylan. Nathan is clear with Jade on not dating until she is older. Javier and Carmen argue about the financial struggles their family is facing. As a result of these dialogue-heavy scenes, Frank Scheck of the *Hollywood Reporter* claimed the themes of family and fatherhood become "hammered home repeatedly."⁶ This criticism is accurate because of the straightforwardness in the delivery of exposition, leaving little room for subtlety in the storytelling.

After setup and establishing setting and character, claimed McKee, comes the event that begins the character's journey: the Inciting Incident. According to McKee, the Inciting Incident "first throws the protagonist's life out of balance, then arouses in him the desire to restore that balance." However, McKee also claimed that while a protagonist might pursue an Object of Desire, that being a conscious desire, he might also be unknowingly pursuing an unconscious

desire. “No matter what the character consciously thinks he wants, the audience senses or realizes that deep inside he unconsciously wants the very opposite.”⁷

In *The Tree of Life*, the Inciting Incident happens practically without words, as Mrs. O’Brien silently reads the telegram informing her of R. L.’s death before finally crying out. Mr. O’Brien likewise cannot say anything when he hears the news. However, the O’Brien’s still react to their son’s death. They quietly walk through their house and their neighborhood, remember the times they had with R. L., and even distance themselves from family and friends looking to comfort them. Years later, Jack has become cynical and closed up emotionally to the people and world around him, although he still wonders about the hope that eventually consoled his mother through her pain. As Mrs. O’Brien and Jack seek God for answers (their conscious desire), their quiet reflection as they remember the past leads them to realize the ongoing struggle between the way of nature and the way of grace and seek reconciliation (their unconscious desire).

In *Courageous*, the Inciting Incident happens also with few words, as the Mitchell family sits in silence at Emily’s funeral listening to the pastor’s eulogy. As this scene and the following scenes reveal, however, Adam, Victoria, and Dylan all react to the Inciting Incident. Adam and Victoria question their own parenting and regret not spending more time with their daughter. Dylan closes up emotionally and shuts everyone around him out of his life. The Mitchell family certainly reacts to the loss of Emily. However, the same cannot necessarily be said for the other four fathers and their families, who are featured very little at the occurrence of the inciting incident. Furthermore, when Adam does make his decision to become a better father (his conscious desire), there is no inner conflict to suggest an unconscious desire. Similar to the straightforward dialogue establishing exposition in the film’s first act, Adam’s desire is spelled out bluntly with no hint of an unconscious desire.

Act Two

“When the protagonist steps out of the Inciting Incident, he enters a world governed by the Law of Conflict,” stated McKee. “To wit: *Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict* (original emphasis).”⁸ According to McKee, a story must contain inner, personal, and extra-personal conflict not only to convey themes and create complex characters but also to progress the narrative. Therefore, the dramatization of conflict as well as the presence of conflict is essential in storytelling.

In *The Tree of Life*, conflict is dramatized by extended flashbacks and voice-over narration. Flashbacks and voice-over narration are two techniques that McKee warned could be manipulative to the viewer if used incorrectly. However, he also claimed, “A flashback can work wonders if we follow the fine principles of conventional exposition.”⁹ According to McKee, the writer must dramatize flashbacks containing information that the audience has the desire and need to know. Concerning voice-over narration, he encouraged screenwriters to respect the old adage, ‘Show, don’t tell.’ “‘Show, don’t tell’ means respect the intelligence and sensitivity of your audience. Invite them to bring their best selves to the ritual, to watch, think, feel, and draw their own conclusions.”¹⁰

The film’s extended flashbacks create a loose structure in the narrative, as the perspective transitions from an older Mrs. O’Brien and present-day Jack to their younger selves. However, the flashbacks still follow conventional exposition, as defined by McKee, because of their conflict and turning points. The flashbacks portray young Jack surrounded by a gracious mother, a demanding father, obedient brothers, and rebellious friends. Jack experiences inner conflict as he tries to determine what to do, either to love or hate the people around him. These specific flashbacks act as turning points in Jack’s life. When his friend dies in the pool, Jack chooses to not trust God. When R. L. tells his father to be quiet at the dinner table, Jack chooses to defend his brother rather than obey his parents. When Jack has the opportunity, he chooses to break into

his neighbor's house. Conflict and turning points are visually dramatized, leading not only to complex character development but also a progressing narrative.

Critical reception for this loose structure was mixed. Nick Pinkerton of the *Village Voice* stated, "Scenes occur as if bobbing on the surface of a family's collective consciousness," adding that "the film can be read as occurring in the mind of adult Jack returning to his birthright of memories."¹¹ Indeed, scenes in *The Tree of Life* are often short, passing quickly from one to the next. This loose structure dramatizes the memory of Mrs. O'Brien and Jack, as brief moments in their life appear in their memory, passing from one to the next.

However, Wesley Morris of the *Boston Globe*, when specifically describing the film's creation sequence, claimed, "No tension comes from these images. They accumulate but don't build."¹² Indeed, not all the flashbacks dramatized from Jack's life are strong decision-making events for his character (such as playing outside with his brothers or attending school). Consequentially, viewers may not find tension for extended sequences in the film until Jack faces a clear choice (such as whether or not to obey God or his parents).

Voice-over narration in *The Tree of Life* is not used to give context to scenes but rather reveal the characters' inner conflict. For example, when Jack asks God about the death of his friend, he never shares explicit details surrounding the death. Jack simply asks, "Was he bad?" His narration is not revealing any more information that the audience should know about the circumstances of his friend's death. Instead, conflict between Jack and God is dramatized as Jack questions why these events happened. This use of narration continues throughout the film, as characters rarely explain information but rather speak intimately with God, contributing to the characters' inner conflict.

Even when the characters in *The Tree of Life* do speak to one another, information is delivered quietly and subtly, as are the film's themes of loss of innocence and questioning God. When an argument ensues at the O'Brien family table, nobody lectures at each other. When Jack

goes to R.L. asking for forgiveness, he speaks to his brother in very few words. When Mrs. O'Brien's mother comes to console her after the death of R.L., their words to each other are few. Dialogue in *The Tree of Life* is used very sparingly in order to prevent too much explicit information from being delivered verbally, and to place emphasis instead on characters' inner thoughts.

Addressing the lack of dialogue and prevalence of voice-over in *The Tree of Life*, Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* called the film "a prolonged meditation on significant issues that is light on conventional narration and dialogue and heavy on voice-over appeals to a higher power."¹³ Todd McCarthy of the *Hollywood Reporter* also acknowledged, "Voice-over snippets suggestive of states of mind register more importantly than dialogue."¹⁴ These criticisms are accurate because the narration not only reveals character instead of relaying exposition, but the narration also takes precedence over the dialogue in terms of developing character.

In *Courageous*, conflict is revealed much more conventionally than in *The Tree of Life*, within a linear story structure through dialogue-driven scenes. Although the overall plot concerns Adam Mitchell's character arc, the narrative also contains several subplots following Shane Fuller, Nathan Hayes, David Thomson, and Javier Martinez and their families. McKee welcomed the idea of subplots in a story to break up monotony: "A subplot receives less emphasis and screentime than a Central Plot, but often it's the invention of a subplot that lifts a troubled screenplay to a film worth making."¹⁵

McKee suggested that subplots could be used to complicate the Central Plot, to contradict the Controlling Idea of the Central Plot, or to resonate the Controlling Idea with variations on a theme. But McKee's fourth reason for using subplots relates most closely with the structure of *Courageous*: "When the Central Plot's Inciting Incident must be delayed, a setup subplot may be needed to open the storytelling."¹⁶

In an approximate running time of two hours, the Inciting Incident of *Courageous* occurs around the forty-minute mark, making the event rather late. However, the story progresses in the opening forty minutes before the incident because each of the five fathers is introduced, each with his own struggle within his family. These multiple storylines not only move the story along, but they also provide variations on the theme of fatherhood, allowing the theme to resonate throughout the whole film.

However, McKee stated that, just like the Central Plot, subplots must have their own Inciting Incident, Points of No Return, Climax, and Resolution. Not only does this structure help the flow of the overall narrative, but this also gives the characters in these subplots more development. *Courageous* includes so many subplots, each one transitioning to the next, that there is sometimes little connection between events. Thus, there is an overload of information that detracts from the power of each character's arc.

Gary Goldstein of the *Los Angeles Times* called out the film's "overbearing, overlong script" and topics "examined with didacticism and platitudes instead of by mining their inherent complexities."¹⁷ Because of the multiple subplots and the uneven screen time spent between them, this criticism is accurate in describing the lack of character development in *Courageous*. For instance, between the film's midpoint and low point – that is, the Resolution ceremony and Shane's arrest – Shane's subplot did not progress. Neither he nor his son was shown onscreen as he struggled with his commitment to keep his word. When Adam catches Shane and reluctantly has him arrested, the moment is less impactful because the narrative has not given enough screen time for the characters in the scene that are affected the most.

Furthermore, subplots are not only ignored at times, but they are often also resolved too quickly. For example, after the Resolution ceremony, David decides to send a letter to Amanda letting her know of his recent conversion and request to reconcile with her and Olivia. This event occurs about 82 minutes in the running time. Once David finishes writing the letter, he does not

even appear in the film again for about 20 minutes. His next appearance is during a silent montage after the low point, where he and Amanda sit in a café making conversation. Although their words are inaudible, giving the viewer the ability to engage with the story and think about what they might be saying, the moment is so brief that David's subplot seems cut short. Even in the film's final sequence, as clips of the five fathers are shown overtop Adam's address to his congregation, David's interaction with Amanda and Olivia is incredibly brief, potentially removing the viewer's emotional involvement with his journey.

The subplots in *Courageous* progress and unite the narrative by creating variations on the theme of fatherhood, as each of the characters have individual struggles, successes, and failures to overcome within their families. However, as the film progresses, the screen time between characters becomes unequal. Because the journeys of the characters do not always overlap with each other, the overall narrative struggles to keep focus.

Act Three

When describing the importance of a story's Climax, McKee stated, "This crowning Major Reversal is not necessarily full of noise and violence. Rather, it must be full of meaning."¹⁸ McKee even claimed the Climax serves as a tool for screenwriters to build up to: once a Climax for a story is determined, the writer must work backwards to create events leading up to the event. "All scenes must be thematically or structurally justified in the light of the Climax," stated McKee. "If they can be cut without disturbing the impact of the ending, they must be cut."¹⁹

The Climax of *The Tree of Life* occurs with the sequence portraying the reunion and reconciliation of the O'Brien family on the beach and snowy landscapes. The sequence contains little noise and no violence; on the contrary, the Climax is quite peaceful. However, the sequence is not without meaning, especially after the utterance of Jack's last line of narration: "Help us, guide us till the end of time." This idea is visualized by adult Jack being guided by his younger

self to the place where he finally embraces his mother, stands side-by-side with his father, and watches his brother walk off into the distance. In this Climax, the O'Brien family finds each other at the end of time and reconciles together. The familial and spiritual conflict leading up to this point is finally given payoff in this Climax.

The Climax of *Courageous* occurs with a final shootout between Adam, Shane, and David and the thugs they have pursued on and off throughout the narrative. This Climax, contrary to that of *The Tree of Life*, does contain noise and violence, adding tension to the story that hopefully will lead to a victory for the protagonist. Unfortunately, however, the theme of fatherhood is mostly put aside in this scene in favor of an action sequence. Adam does attempt to save the little girl that the thugs were chasing and make sure she got back to her father, hinting at the idea of fatherhood. However, the main conflict in this Climax is between the police and the criminals, not between a parent and child. The familial conflict leading up to the Climax is not given full payoff in this event.

Following the Climax, however, is the resolution, which McKee claimed is necessary especially if the Climax has moved the audience. "For if the Climax has moved the filmgoers," stated McKee, "it's rude suddenly to go black and roll the titles." The Resolution, therefore, must provide closure to the entire narrative, "so the audience can catch its breath, gather its thoughts, and leave the cinema with dignity."²⁰

Although the Resolution in *The Tree of Life* is very brief, the narrative nevertheless finds closure. An angelic Mrs. O'Brien lifts her hands in surrender, committing her son to God. Following this, Jack finds himself back in present-day with a renewed sense of optimism about his surroundings. These two characters, whose journeys began the narrative of the film, have now found both their conscious desire to find answers as well as their unconscious desires to reconcile with their past. The journey to reconciliation spanned many years, dating back even to

the beginning of time itself. However, despite the unconventional structure of the journey, the characters find the closure they needed.

A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* praised *The Tree of Life* for its unconventional structure portraying an enormous amount of time. “The loss of innocence is not a singular event in history but rather an axiom of human experience,” stated Scott, “repeated in every generation and in the consciousness of every individual.” Scott maintained, even “without any of the usual architecture of dramatic exposition,” Malick had created an “almost perfect domestic narrative.”²¹ Indeed, because Mrs. O’Brien and Jack sought answers from God that required knowledge of time beyond their own lives, the structure of *The Tree of Life* demanded an unconventional structure that studied time itself.

The Resolution in *Courageous* presents closure for the five fathers and their families, each with their own individual conclusions. Adam addresses the congregation in church about his commitment to fatherhood and acknowledges the varying perspectives that fathers will have on the Resolution for Men. This sermon reveals the variations on the theme of fatherhood that the five main characters represent. Additionally, the sermon provides the congregation – and the viewing audience – with a call to action, specifically for fathers to take a stand to lead their families.

However, the sermon is just that – a sermon. Roger Moore referred to the resolution of *Courageous* as an “altar call finale.”²² Nathan Rabin of the *A.V. Club* criticized the “closing monologue that delivers the message of the movie in a shiny little box.”²³ Both critics acknowledge that the film’s ending is more a verbal appeal to the audience rather than a dramatized resolution, although several visuals do reinforce the sermon. Overtop Adam addressing the congregation are clips of events to come. Adam runs in a race with Dylan and Tyler. Nathan reads Scripture to his family at home and to Derrick in jail. Shane sits alone in his prison cell, contemplating. Javier reads Scripture to his family at home. David visits Amanda and

Olivia at their home. But because these moments are brief and wordless, the Resolution becomes more of an altar call rather than dramatized closure.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This project asked the question: What are the differences and similarities between films dealing with Christian faith made by secular and evangelical filmmakers? Previous research on this subject has detailed the story structure and character development in films dealing with issues of faith, as well as the methods evangelical filmmakers have taken similar to secular filmmakers to produce and distribute media.

Case studies on Terrence Malick, Alex Kendrick, and their films have identified prevalent spiritual themes and issues in their work, although the execution of these narratives differs between the filmmakers. *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* provided two specific examples of films with similar familial and spiritual themes told with different storytelling techniques. Based on analysis according to Robert McKee's *Story* and guidelines on three-act structure in screenwriting, the films ultimately proved to have varying techniques in their storytelling.

The Tree of Life and *Courageous* differ firstly in the delivery of exposition. *The Tree of Life* contains minimal dialogue and verbal acknowledgment of a scene's location or time period, or even the names of the characters. This limited delivery of information is established in the film's opening, as Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien mourn the death of R. L., although neither mentions his age, the circumstances of his death, or even his name. *Courageous*, however, contains substantially more dialogue than *The Tree of Life* and primarily uses dialogue to deliver exposition. Nearly every scene in the film's first act verbally reveals information about characters' names, occupations, and conflict with others, including family members.

Although *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* contain differing amounts of dialogue, the films contain dialogue nonetheless, as evidenced by the scene analyses featured previously in this project. As characters communicate with each other in *The Tree of Life*, sentences are

fragmented as no one says exactly what he or she means to say. In scenes such as when Mrs. O'Brien's mother comes to comfort her, or when the O'Brien family has an argument at the dining table, or when Jack asks R. L. for forgiveness, characters speak in short statements as if trying to find the right words to say. The dialogue in *Courageous*, however, not only relays exposition about the plot and characters but that also expresses the conflicts and emotions that the characters are experiencing. In scenes such as when the Mitchell family mourns for Emily, when they reconcile together, or when Shane asks Adam for forgiveness, characters verbally acknowledge their emotions. Several other scenes, such as when Adam's pastor consoles him after the loss of Emily or when Nathan shares the Gospel with David, contain longer blocks of dialogue that become more similar to speeches rather than conversation.

Concerning issues of faith and spirituality, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* also differ vastly. Although both feature characters practicing a Christian worldview, that worldview is explained very differently between the films. *The Tree of Life* opens with a title containing a verse from the Biblical book of Job. Several scenes feature the O'Brien family in church or praying at home. However, although there are scenes of infant Jack being baptized and the three O'Brien boys being confirmed in the church as preteens, the denomination of the church is unspecified. As characters pray, they rarely refer to that higher power as "God" or "Lord." Even the film's title, perhaps an allusion to the Biblical tree of life, is never clearly identified in the film. Although the film explicitly references a Christian worldview through the characters, specifics about faith and spirituality are rather vague throughout the film, culminating in the nearly wordless final sequence as the O'Brien family reunites and reconciles on the beach.

Courageous contains explicit references to a Christian worldview, in characters' actions as well as their conversations. Several scenes show characters praying in a group, such as during montages where the five main fathers pray together, or alone, such as when Javier desperately cries out to God for help while looking for employment. Several conversations explain Christian

theology straightforwardly, prominently that between Nathan and David as Nathan openly shares the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A Christian worldview is not solely portrayed in the film but promoted, culminating in a final sequence where Adam appeals to the men in his church to take a stand for leadership, followed by a title featuring a verse from the Biblical book of Joshua.

The Tree of Life and *Courageous* primarily differ in their storytelling based on the amount of information they convey to the audience. *The Tree of Life* reveals little exposition about the setting, characters, or even spirituality. The ambiguous resolution and lack of information given to the audience leads to an unsatisfying narrative. *Courageous* provides all the necessary information on characters' names, occupations, and relationships with other characters. Additionally, characters explain in detail their attitudes towards Christianity, their families, and their own emotions. The prevalence of dialogue deconstructing the subtext and the quick resolution of conflict leads to an unsatisfying narrative.

However, despite the differences in storytelling between *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, the films still find similarities in storytelling, firstly in their inclusion of conflict. In *The Tree of Life*, Mrs. O'Brien and Jack face conflict as they struggle to reconcile with the grief they have dealt with in the loss of R. L. In *Courageous*, Adam Mitchell and his family and colleagues face conflict as they struggle to reconcile the bonds within their own families.

As the characters in both *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* struggle to resolve conflict, they face turning points and low points as they decide what to do. In *The Tree of Life*, Jack experiences the most turning points in his journey, as he must constantly decide between disobedience and obedience, the way of nature versus the way of grace. His choices lead him to disobedience, eventually reaching the low point of harming R. L., causing Jack to feel remorse. But as Jack takes initiative to reconcile with R. L., he finds resolution by ultimately following the way of grace.

In *Courageous*, the characters, especially the five fathers, also face turning points, low points, and reconciliation as they decide what to do. In *Courageous*, Adam faces a turning point after Emily's death and must take initiative to be a better father. Nathan faces a turning point when he must choose to forgive his father whom he never met. David's strongest turning point comes as he decides to reach out to Amanda and make amends with her and Olivia. Javier faces a turning point when he must choose whether or not to report dishonest information in order to be promoted. Shane's turning point comes when he must choose between stealing evidence and honestly making a profit. All five fathers eventually make decisions that lead him to honesty and reconciliation – even Shane, whose decisions eventually lead him to his – and the story's – low point.

Finally, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* share similarities in their overall themes and content. Both films portray families practicing a Christian worldview that is emphasized throughout the narrative, including the explicit use of Scripture. However, those within families in both films struggle nevertheless to love one another, as parents feel unable to control their children and children yearn to disobey or be separated from their parents. Characters are prompted to change, however, after the death of a loved one. Characters then ask God why the tragedy had to happen and how they could have lived differently while their loved one was still alive. Ultimately, this event prompts parents and children in both films to reconcile, with one another and with God.

The two films share many similarities in their plots, themes, and character development. However, the execution of these narrative elements is very different between the films. Filmmakers Terrence Malick and Alex Kendrick took a similar subject matter with *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, respectively, and manipulated the story structure in such a way that the final films became quite different. As a result, *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* represent two examples of filmmaking about Christian faith, Malick's being told from a more secular point of

view and Kendrick's from a more evangelical point of view. Ultimately, both films received acclaim and financial success from audiences.

This insight on the variations of story structure is essential for filmmakers of any religious background. As writers study the various methods in which to construct a screenplay, they can discover ways to tell an original story that reflects their personal values. Malick and Kendrick have done this, with *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, respectively, using characters, conflict, and recurring themes to tell a personal story rooted in faith.

McKee himself reinforced the necessity of writers seeking originality in their screenplays. McKee claimed the greatest filmmakers and screenwriters are able to create stories that are distinctly their vision, using the guidelines of storytelling: "Their formal choices—number of protagonists, rhythm of progressions, levels of conflict, temporal arrangements, and the like—play with and against substantive choices of content—setting, character, idea—until all elements meld into a unique screenplay."¹

However, while *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* are two examples of similar stories told from two distinct filmmaking perspectives, Dr. Linda Seger also offers insight on two types of storytelling in film that can be applied to these films. Seger, a script consultant since 1981, served as a contributor to Spencer Lewerenz and Barbara Nicolosi's 2005 anthology, *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture*. In her essay, "What Kind of Stories Should We Tell?", Seger identifies two types of stories the Christian screenwriter usually chooses to write: the prescriptive or the descriptive.

The prescriptive story focuses on showing how the world *can* be rather than how it *is*. According to Seger, these stories contain themes of hope and redemption through a specifically Christian worldview, but their delivery is often problematic. "Instead of showing the process people go through to find God," stated Seger, "these writers are eager to show the result. They

sometimes tend to make everything pretty and nice. They forget to show the struggle, pain, resistances, obstacles, and courage needed to turn to the Christian life.”²

The descriptive story dramatizes life and reality more than the prescriptive story and may be potentially better received by a universal audience as it lacks an evangelistic message. However, because of their broader appeal, Seger claimed that these stories could be problematic as well. Writers of descriptive stories, according to Seger, “often put the focus on right action rather than right belief. . . . In the process of trying to use drama in essentially dramatic ways, the transformations that occur in these films may not seem overtly Christian, but may, instead, be a transformation to goodness, compassion, kindness, sensitivity, and change.”³

In her identification of the prescriptive and descriptive methods of storytelling by Christian screenwriter, Seger established a dichotomy between two sides of filmmaking about faith. The prescriptive story offers hope from a Christian worldview but fails, she argues, to dramatize reality; the descriptive story dramatizes reality but fails to offer hope from a Christian worldview. If a screenwriter attempts to tell a story portraying Christian faith from one of these two methods, the final product will have faults.

However, Seger offered that writing a story that is both prescriptive and descriptive is possible, through a transformational arc. A story must present problems for a protagonist as well as a clear journey for him to draw closer and farther from God, with events occurring within that journey that force him to react. As a protagonist interacts with other characters, those characters must not give him advice simply through dialogue but through relationships: the protagonist interacts with others and is affected by their kindness, sadness, or anger.

Seger also emphasized that drama involves using subtext rather than explaining meaning. Therefore, according to Seger, “the Christian writer has to be willing to suggest rather than tell.” She explained:

“The Christian writer has to be willing to give the viewer choices, knowing that the film might be only one step in the audience’s transformation... But if done well, it will reach within the hearts of the audience and touch a center of free will that offers them a new way of thinking and feeling, a new way of judging, a new possibility of being.”⁴

Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* represents the ‘descriptive’ storytelling that Seger described, with quiet delivery of exposition, complex and intimate character development, and themes of Christian faith that transcend conventional storytelling. However, many questions remain unanswered by the ending about the characters, their futures, and even their worldview. Alex Kendrick’s *Courageous*, on the other hand, represents the ‘prescriptive’ storytelling Seger described. The film addresses the potential healing, reconciliation, and strong relationships to be gained from a family following a Christian worldview. However, themes are hardly dramatized because of a prevalence of dialogue and lack of sustained conflict.

The Tree of Life and *Courageous*, despite their similar subject matter, certainly contain many differences in their ‘descriptive’ or ‘prescriptive’ storytelling. However, this particular study contains limitations in the fact that the films are but two examples of motion pictures to analyze in order to specify differences in faith-based filmmaking. Studying Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and Alex Kendrick’s *Courageous* only provides a single example that distinguishes ‘descriptive’ storytelling from ‘prescriptive’ storytelling in faith-based filmmaking.

Moreover, Terrence Malick and Alex Kendrick as filmmakers also suggest limitations to this study. These directors have varying levels of experience, storytelling technique, and even theological background. However, one additional difference between the two filmmakers affects the comparison between *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*: Malick’s loss of his brother. The character of R. L. in *The Tree of Life*, who died at age 19 and played guitar as a youth, is quite reminiscent of Larry Malick. The film never clarifies R. L.’s cause of death, leaving open-ended

the possibility that he may have committed suicide, thus paralleling the tragic loss of Malick's own brother. Kendrick, however, never suffered the loss of a brother, suggesting that the death of Emily in *Courageous* is not personally informed from his own experience, or at least not as personally as Malick's.

Since the release of these films, however, both Malick and Kendrick have continued to produce feature films dealing with spiritual themes and issues. In 2015, both directors released two new films, *Knight of Cups* and *War Room*, respectively. Malick's latest, about a Hollywood screenwriter searches for meaning in life, revealed, according to Justin Chang of *Variety*, "Malick's view remains a deeply and unapologetically Christian one."⁵ Kendrick's latest, about a suburban family learning to incorporate prayer into their daily lives, was called "heavy on broad pulpit pounding" by Tom Russo of the *Boston Globe*, though he noted the film's third act became "somewhat more authentic."⁶

2015 provided even more opportunities for research and analysis on the differences in faith-based filmmaking. The works of several evangelical filmmakers drew comparison from critics to other secular films dealing with similar subject matter. For example, Alonso Duralde of *The Wrap* compared Pure Flix Entertainment's multi-protagonist drama *Do You Believe?* to the similarly structured 2005 drama *Crash*.⁷ Ignaty Vishnevetsky of the *A.V. Club* referred to Pure Flix's romance drama *Old Fashioned* as "the conservative Evangelical answer to *Fifty Shades of Grey*."⁸ Michael Rechtshaffen of the *Los Angeles Times* referenced Pure Flix's football drama *Woodlawn* as "an evangelical 'Remember the Titans.'"⁹

Evangelical films such as these, reminiscent of secular films with similar structures and themes, reveal the possibility for future comparative analysis. However, these films also reveal the struggle for filmmakers, specifically evangelical directors, to create original content without borrowing material from previous films. Robert McKee addressed this struggle in *Story*, referring to what he named "The War on Cliché," as screenwriters often create stories lacking

original material. “So where do they run? To films and TV, novels and plays with similar settings.” McKee enforced, “Knowledge of and insight into the world of your story is fundamental to the achievement of originality and excellence.”¹⁰ Future research analyzing differences in secular and evangelical films with similar subject matter will identify how these films differ in their execution as well as their originality.

However, further research is not only possible in terms of analysis, but also in terms of filmmaking itself. Jon Erwin, co-director of *Woodlawn* and second unit director on *Courageous*, claimed to *USA Today* evangelical films have the potential to compete at the box office with Hollywood blockbusters, giving Christian filmmakers an opportunity to impact the world. “ ‘In five to seven years,’ ” predicted Erwin, “ ‘we’ll see Christian blockbusters... We have the numbers, we have the resources, we’re marching up that mountain together.’ ”¹¹

In *Story*, however, McKee gave advice any filmmaker, Christian or non-Christian, should take: to actively pursue improvement in storytelling. “Write every day, line by line, page by page, hour by hour,” encouraged McKee, “until command of [this book’s] principles becomes as natural as the talent you were born with...”¹² Seger also suggested the risk filmmakers take when creating faith-based films, for not all audiences may immediately understand the subject matter. “Theology and drama are multileveled and subtextual; it’s easy for inaccurate theological ideas to be communicated,” stated Seger. “Drama, like any medium, has limits. With it, you can influence lives, you can change attitudes, but you may not change someone to action.”¹³

However, there is potential to not only entertain and move audiences and other filmmakers with stories dealing with a Christian worldview, but also to dialogue with others about those issues outside of the film itself. This dialogue is what Ron Austin, author of the essay “The Hollywood Divide” in *Behind the Screen*, claimed must happen in order to bridge the gap between secular and evangelical filmmakers. Austin asked,

“Are we free and courageous enough to open ourselves to the suffering of our nonbelieving adversary? Doing so requires confronting our own unresolved inner conflicts, and perhaps much more. I think the creative process requires that we do this if we are to write honest scripts and make good films. But, whether or not we’re making films, this is what Jesus and the Gospels ask of us.”¹⁴

This analysis of *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous* has presented a comparison between two specific films dealing with similar familial conflict and Christian subject matter. The former film contains characters, conflict, and resolution as the O’Brien family reconciles their past, although many specific details about their lives are left unrevealed. The latter film contains characters, conflict, and resolution as Adam, Shane, Nathan, David, and Javier take initiative to lead their families, although many specific details about their lives are revealed without dramatization.

In short, *The Tree of Life* says too little, and *Courageous* says too much. The two films differ the most in their dramatization of character and conflict. However, while this dramatization reveals major differences between *The Tree of Life* and *Courageous*, a similarity is also revealed: neither film dramatizes information on plot, character, and conflict in a way that is completely satisfying to the viewer. This case study reveals the struggle that secular and evangelical filmmakers face in their storytelling, to provide just the right amount of exposition, dialogue, conflict, and resolution to create a complete narrative.

Therefore, as filmmakers pursue storytelling dealing with spiritual themes and story elements, the objective to dramatize conflict is essential, for both the Christian and the non-Christian. This project provides insight into films that differ in the dramatization of their stories, as well as story structure theory, to be used to reach that objective. Perhaps in the future, evangelical filmmakers may indeed be creating motion pictures alongside nonbelievers to not only compete at the box office or with critics, but also to build a bridge between a secular and evangelical community.

CITATIONS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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