Training Day: Lawful Good vs. Chaotic Evil

CLJ 345

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Popular Media Analysis Assignment

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Training Day is a crime film based on a day in the life of Narcotic Division hopeful officer Jake Hoyt of the Los Angeles Police Department. A higher-up of the Narcotics Division, Detective Alonzo Harris, evaluates Hoyt and the movie tells the tale of what transpired on their adventure in a twenty-four hour time period. The movie starts with Detective Harris portrayed as a sarcastic, hard-as-nails police officer with somewhat questionable means. But by the time the credits roll, Harris is seen more as a belligerent criminal than a sworn police officer because of his actions to achieve his form of “justice”. Harris uses his badge as a shield to cover up his criminal enterprise and unlawful tendencies. This entire movie’s plot is about how Harris tries to justify his criminal actions to Hoyt to break him into the world he is entering as a narcotics officer and prospective detective.

The first catalyst that slowly shows Harris’ corrupt nature is how he conducts a drug search and seizure at the beginning of the movie. Harris had probable cause to search the vehicle and the people inside because he saw the drug deal take place from a distance. Yet, that does not excuse his excess use of force that he used to obtain the drugs and to intimidate the passengers of the vehicle. The passengers of the car are not resisting the advances of Harris and Hoyt to retrieve the marijuana from them, but Harris still uses unnecessary force by tugging on the driver’s ears to get him to comply and intimidate. From lecture, I learned that officers are trained to use a continuum of force to get the appropriate outcome from suspects of crime. The steps are: mere presence of the officer, verbalization when approaching, commanding voice, firm grip on the suspect or suspects, pain compliance, impact techniques, and finally the use of deadly force. This display of search and seizure of narcotics was superfluous to say the least. Upon approaching the suspect’s vehicle, they were not trying to drive off to evade the officers. Harris, followed by Hoyt, immediately began brandishing guns from an unmarked police car.

Another instance of Harris using unnecessary force is during the scene after Hoyt fought with the two homeless men to stop them from sexually assaulting a fourteen year old girl in the alleyway. Hoyt apprehended the criminals while Harris watched the ordeal from a distance to “observe” Hoyt’s capabilities as an officer. After they were restrained, one of the criminals insults Harris by using foul language. He then uses this opportunity to terrorize the criminal by using verbal force, waving his knife in the criminal’s face, and aiming both of his pistols at his genitalia. While I watched this scene, I thought about the impossible police mandate and how difficult it can be to implement it during police work. Manning’s “impossible” police mandate explains how society has many unrealistic expectations and unreasonable responsibilities of the police and the criminal justice system. The role of a individual police officer is crime prevention, crime detection, and the apprehension of those criminals in an unbiased, professional manner. In William Westley’s, *Violence and the Police,* he discusses the duties of the police force. He explains how overwhelming the work is dealing with the “dirty work” that entails, “... dealing with drunks, with the insane, with the dead, with the vice-ridden, with th ill...”(Westley, 139). Harris may be a detective, but he is still expected to follow the guidelines of the mandate. Harris is not at fault for not detecting the crime while he was focusing on the road, but he did not exercise crime prevention and apprehend the criminals in a professional manner. He allowed the rapists to be set back into the world because of “street justice” would take care of the criminals and the unnecessary intimidation tactics were unprofessional.

The next scene representing themes found in lecture and the movie was how Harris entered the home of Kevin Miller, also known as “Sandman”, without proper documentation. The two invaded the space and began an unlawful search of the house even though their suspect was not present. Upon finding the money that Harris was searching for, they fled the house to ease the suspicion of their true intent. In Charles Swanson’s, *Criminal Investigation*, he explains that, “A search warrant is a written order, in the name of the state, signed by a judicial officer, exercising proper authority, and directing a law-enforcement officer to search for certain specific property and bring it before the court. To be valid, the warrant must be signed by one who is authorized to sign.” (Swanson, 26). Harris did not prepare any of the above-mentioned documentation to be able to search Sandman’s home. Instead of a search warrant, Harris used a rolled up take out menu to give the appearance of an actual warrant. Even if Harris had found illegal substances of drugs, he would not be able to use the evidence in court to prosecute Sandman because of Fruit of the Poisonous Tree Doctrine. The Fruit of the Poisonous Tree Doctrine inhibits obtained evidence from an unreasonable search and seizure in court against a suspect. The unlawful evidence cannot be used as the basis for learning about or collecting new admissible evidence not known about beforehand.

The comprehensive problem of the film is Harris’ issue with conducting his tasks of policing in a deviant, unprofessional way to get what he wants. Harris displays that he suffers from the Dirty Harry Problem. The Dirty Harry Problem is the honest moral plight officers struggle with during their work and involves the use of misconduct to attain an urgent and unquestionably good outcome. This means that some police officers have good intentions to solve a crime, but they use dirty measures to achieve that good outcome. In the movie, Harris tells Hoyt that, “ To protect the sheep, you got to catch the wolf. It takes a wolf to catch a wolf.” This is not an excuse for Harris’ corruption, but it does explain the method to his madness. In lecture, Professor Saulnier explained why police officers turn to these deviant tactics in order to acquire a satisfying result. The police can be corrupt for four different reasons: the police are powerful, the community and political environment is influential, tolerance among citizens, and patterns of deviance can become standards of police behavior.

After that scene, the movie goes more into detail about Harris’ Vegas incident where he beat a Russian mobster to death while he was there. Harris is now tasked with paying the Russian mafia a million dollars to be able to stay alive. To obtain the money he needs, he used many corrupt tactics in attempt to get in the mafia’s good graces. The money he stole from the Sandman’s home was to pay the Three Wise Men in order to get a search warrant to obtain the actual money Harris needs to pay off the mafia. This part of the movie is where I noticed how corrupt the entire police force is portrayed in the film. The Three Wise Men are higher ups and heads of different departments of the Los Angeles Police Department. Stan Gusky, the District Attorney of the Shooting Team, openly accepted a bribe from Harris to gain a warrant. In lecture, we talked about the different theories that explain why police officers engage in deviant crimes such as the crimes that the Three Wise Men committed. One of the theories, the rotten apple theory, explains that weak-minded officers are tempted by the deviant nature of police work or they were able to “slip” through the cracks of the screening process to become officers in the first place. The nature of police work accentuates their bad behavior. Their corrupt behavior theory either goes unchecked or others join in on the extortion. This is by no means justifies their behavior and the theory itself does not give a sufficient rationale for many factors. For instance, the theory does not explain why good people turn to crime in their jobs to fight that crime. It also does not analyze why one police department has an extensive history of deviance and how another department does not.

The next scene shows how Harris and his team of narcotics officers fabricate the scene of how Roger was killed. The four officers rehearse how they entered the retired officer home and about who shot whom to make the scene more authentic. Harris says himself, “ It’s not what you know, it’s about what you can prove,” when Hoyt questions their methods. Harris then decides to pin the murder of Roger on Hoyt to make him a decorated officer. Hoyt is the only one who does not agree with this turn of events. This is not the first time that the other officers bump heads with Hoyt. They accept the money from the Roger’s “confiscated” drug money while Hoyt is hesitant to do so. Hoyt could not take the bribe from Harris, but he could smoke the drugs and drink the beer he was offered while on the job. Hoyt is a grass eater. A grass eater is a police officer that partakes in small instances of police deviance or corruption. A grass eater is more of an opportunist and engages in misconduct when the deviance is in an area where they believe it’s acceptable to do so. Harris and his team are meat eaters. A meat eater is a police officer that actively seeks out situations and opportunities where they can abuse their police power to get a favorable outcome. Harris admitted that he deliberately plotted for a week how he would steal Roger’s money during the seizure. T. Barker expands on the Knapp Commission’s definitions of the typology of unlawful officers with listing white knights, straight shooters, and rogues.

Harris and his team worked so well together because of their status as police officers in the same department. They have the same deviant goals by using their unethical tactics to get ahead on the police food chain and applying their influence in situations where they can reap some type of benefit like money or more power. Their personalities are similar to each other. The working personality suggests that occupational groups tend to develop complementary outlooks on life and responding to their environments. In the pre-dispositional model of the working personality, it explains that from a psychological standpoint, some people are psychologically drawn to becoming police officers because of the personality traits that are favored in the police force. In the occupational-socialization model, it explains that the police personality is formed through work experience and enforced by interacting with fellow officers. There are three elements that reinforce this behavior: danger, authority, and efficiency. The danger element is how police officers are more aware of instances of crime than other citizens even when they are off duty. In some cases, they have difficulty developing and maintaining relationships with non-police officers because they are deemed a “suspicious person” because of this behavior. The authority element describes how officers are always seen as the authoritative force. Also, the general public places officers under a microscope to watch if they do anything out of the line to deem officers as hypocrites by breaking a law. The last element that reinforces the police personality is the need for efficiency. The police are expected to be upstanding citizens who capture vile criminals, but regular citizens question the execution of police work. All these elements promote isolation from the public and unification between officers.

In conclusion, the overall theme of this movie is police corruption. It uses Harris’ character as a window into the world of police deviance. It shows how easy it is for officers to succumb to their criminal nature through constant exposure to illegal behavior. Even if the intentions are pure, the means to produce a favorable outcome blur the lines of what is right and what is wrong.

References:

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