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The Wrestler

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The Wrestler

Abstract

This is a review of *The Wrestler* (2008).

Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* is a complex film. On one hand, *The Wrestler* is an unlovely film: form and content join in a vivid marriage of gritty storyline and edgy cinematography; and the dialogue is brusque, sharp, and often uncomfortable to listen to. On the other hand, *The Wrestler* is beautiful in its honesty. Its poise is not in smooth words and warm comedy, rather it is a bonfire of authenticities and realities; shattered hearts and misspoken promises brightly decorate the screen in a wholly believable and relatable way. This mixed nature forms a balance in which a prevailing beauty emerges; it is appealing because it is real.

Mickey Rourke stars as Randy "The Ram" Robinson. Randy is a frustrated B-level wrestler who long ago lived out his glory days. Where once he climbed into the ring amidst the cacophony of thousands of fans, he now enters the square to the relative whimper of hundreds. He has a plethora of machismo; abuses drugs; lives a marginal, violent lifestyle; and has no idea about the direction of his life. Circumstances seem to always force him down a path that he would rather not take. Regardless of the direction he takes and the people who impact him along the way, he lowers his head and drives on, convincingly hoping to deal with his desperate lack of certainty and meaning. Eventually, he destroys all hope of finding purpose apart from wrestling, and immures himself to his perceived destiny inside the ring.

One possible religious theme that can be found in the film is that of the “Christ Figure.” Due to gross overuse of the term Christ Figure, it must not be wantonly assigned to any self-sacrificial character featured in products of popular culture. Because of the lack of wholeness in Randy’s representation of the classical Christ Figure, his story and character are more analogous to Christ than representational of Christ; Randy has elements of the Christ Figure, but combines them with gross elements of debauchery and hedonism.

Far from a righteous character, Randy embodies a different vision of the Christ Figure. His body and soul are a topography of scars and depressions caused by years of vainglorious, libertine living, the result of which has left him broken inside and out. This brokenness could be seen as one of the elements of the prophesied Christ from Isaiah 53, the so-called “Suffering Servant” Chapter of Isaiah. The chapter describes a person bearing scars and suffering on the behalf of someone or something else. But for whom is Randy suffering?

One interesting thought is that Randy is suffering for himself. We find that he has abandoned his family, as he likewise abandons his love interest, Cassidy. By the end of the film, he abandons everything except for wrestling and his fans. It is quite possible that his accrued scars and suffering have been focused inwardly. He suffers in order to save himself; his intro-active suffering saves him by giving and

sustaining his identity as a wrestler – the only identity with which he is fully comfortable.

Another possible object of his suffering is his daughter, Stephanie; and his fan-base. After a heart attack, Randy is struck by his own mortality and pursues a relationship with the daughter he alienated. It becomes clear that he cannot sustain a relationship with her without further making her life difficult, so he restarts his wrestling career and separates himself from her in order to “save” her.

Another possible object of Randy’s suffering is his fan-base. One of the few consistencies in Randy’s life are his dedicated fans. During every wrestling match and promotional event, his fans cheer him on and laud his skills and signature moves. When all else fails, Randy returns to wrestling, because he identifies himself as a wrestler and an entertainer, and it is where he feels comfortable. Before beginning his final match, he addresses the crowd in a way not often seen in the arena of professional wrestling: instead of deriding his opponent, or launching into a self-aggrandizing monologue, he opens up to his cheering fans and thanks them. He admits that he has done wrong and has been washed up. Again, this humility could be interpreted a characteristic of the “Suffering Servant” of Christ in Isaiah 53. He sacrifices himself for the love of his fans. He enfolds them into his identity in a final act of love. Instead of quitting, he gives completely of himself for them.

This dedication to those whom he loves costs him everything, much like the standard picture of the ultimate sacrifice of the Christ Figure.

Another dominant theme is the Eternal Feminine – in a simplified understanding – the concept of the redemptive, good, God-Mother. Throughout the film Cassidy and Stephanie share elements of the Eternal Feminine. Cassidy could be seen as shouldering part of the role of the Eternal Feminine, in that she resurrects layers of happiness within Randy that were erstwhile hidden, and she also helps him facilitate a relationship with Stephanie. Stephanie, however, fits more of the characteristics of the classical understanding of the Eternal Feminine.

Before his heart attack, Randy aimlessly and apathetically continues his life as a wrestler. After the incident, Randy seeks out a relationship with his daughter. Because of her, he wants to be make things right again, and he wants to be responsible. It is her presence as the Eternal Feminine that urges him out of his listlessness and dissatisfaction; she passively redeems him to a better life.

The Wrestler is filled with religious and non-religious themes. It will be argued that Randy represents the Christ Figure, though it is perhaps more accurate to argue that Randy has present within his character elements of the Christ figure. The Eternal Feminine is also present. It makes a fractured cameo, splitting time

between Cassidy and Stephanie – both of whom try to find ways to redeem the wounded wrestler.