The Percussive Chaos of *Whiplash*

Whiplash is an intense psychological drama which premiered in theaters 2014. The movie won several awards upon its release, including: Best Film Editing, Best Sound Mixing, and Best Supporting Actor (J.K. Simmons as Fletcher) for the 87th Academy Awards. *Whiplash* is currently streaming on Netflix while also being up for rent on many other streaming services. This film follows an aspiring percussionist, Andrew, throughout his time at a pristine music school - Shaffer Conservatory in New York City. Andrew starts out as a passionate musician whose reality gets completely shattered by an abusive jazz instructor, Fletcher. As time progresses, Fletcher's actions only continue to intensify - being both mentally and physically abusive towards Andrew. The conductor's constant aggressive push for higher standards only further stains the mind of Andrew, as he becomes fully obsessed with his craft along with trying to please his instructor. By the end, Fletcher's manipulations only seals Andrew's fate, his life consumed by a need for perfection - over love, over family, over his own wellbeing. *Whiplash*, while dramatized, still accurately portrays getting lost in obsession and the mental effects of a toxic/manipulative relationship.

To start, abusers often use tactics such as manipulation and two-faced personalities to get into the head of their victims. Fletcher's actions throughout the film reflects this sentiment, first showcasing his duplicitous nature the day Andrew was handpicked to join Fletcher's jazz ensemble. The scene opens with Fletcher giving words of encouragement to Andrew outside of class before throwing him to the waters. Andrew's tasked with playing Whiplash, yet he keeps failing to follow the tempo on time. Fletcher first appears to be understanding, but soon devolves into pure rage when Andrew continues to mess up - ending with Fletcher physically slapping Andrew on tempo and further degrading him. Abusers use psychological manipulation in order

to play with the minds of the people they're targeting and create an anxious environment where the victim never knows what kind of person they will be next. The dichotomy between the abuser's false persona compared with their true intentions furthermore instills another layer of confusion for the victim involved, having to battle internally between the "genuine" moments in the relationship and the times they suffer by the abuser's hand.

To continue this train of thought, the abuser often holds their victims to impossible standards/expectations that tamper with their own self image. Andrew, after Fletcher humiliated him, returns to his dorm with a contemplative look on his face; His phone rings distantly in the background with his dad on the line. After a few moments, he ends the ringing and preps to practice Whiplash. The scene is intense; He's sweating and pushing his body to the limits trying to perfect the time signature - hands blistering and dripping with blood as it pools on his drum set. Many abusers rely on the mentally vulnerable to fully take advantage and manipulate their ideals to better suit their own. This tactic can often spark an extreme change in personality for their victims, as we Andrew dive deeper into the obsession Fletcher shares.

Furthermore, obsession and the over looming threat of a victim's abuser often causes those affected to push loved ones away. After some time and devotion to Fletcher's jazz band, Andrew makes a switch in priorities. He meets up with his girlfriend, Nicole, and breaks up with her to completely focus on perfecting his drumming. This showcases how obsession slowly starts to consume every fiber of someone's being until the only thing that matters is feeding into this behavior. They ignore and often hurt their loved ones trying to pursue perfection, not willing to get help or change once bound to their compulsions.

To close, victims often return back to their abuser or to a similar environment. Some months after Andrew was kicked out of Schaeffer and Fletcher fired from his job, Andrew finds

himself compelled to make contact with his old conductor again. When reunited, Fletcher offers Andrew a position in his jazz band for an upcoming show, which he readily accepts. Soon, the day arrives for Andrew to play and the show begins - but all isn't what it seems. Fletcher lied about what pieces they would perform and totally humiliated Andrew in front of not only a whole theater of people, but also numerous industry jazz sponsors. Andrew gets off the stage furious and embarrassed, but wills himself to return and plays a perfect performance of Caravan - ending with a crescendo of crashing cymbals, snares, and kicks. Though portrayed as a happy moment, the ending makes for a sad realization that both Fletcher and Andrew got validation for their harmful behavior. Many abusers make it seem impossible for their victims to leave when their actions often cause the total downfall and dependence upon the person they manipulate. With the rare moments of happiness/validation, abusers often give a taste of positivity in the sea of bad behavior to give the victims something to stay for and strive to feel again - trapping them in a cycle.

In conclusion, *Whiplash,* while exaggerated, accurately portrays getting lost in obsession and the mental effects of toxic relationships through the portrayal of an abuser's deceitful actions, the impossible standards an abuser hold's to their victim, pushing away loved ones, and returning to the abuse. Andrew's entire being gets engulfed by the need to be the best and prove to Fletcher that he would do anything to "succeed." The climax showcases the start of the end for Andrew - his obsession taking priority over his own sanity; Which I believe ends an incredible movie in such a gut-wrenching, yet breathtaking way. As media critic Joshua Lee recounts, his first time watching Whiplash "felt genuinely transformative…shaping my perception of the medium and what it could be." (Lee). I would recommend anyone to indulge and watch this film - it's truly a masterpiece!

Works Cited

Lee, Joshua. “10 Years on, “Whiplash” is as Breathtaking as it is Misunderstood.” *The Statesman,* FLEX Pro WordPress Theme, 23 Sept 2024, https://sbstatesman.com/128769/arts/10-years-on-whiplash-is-as-breathtaking-as-it-is-misunderstood/. Accessed 2 Dec 2024.