

### Movie Analysis: The Phantom Menace

Star Wars: The Phantom Menace confounded Star Wars universe aficionados and movie critics alike when it rose to the top of the saga as the most powerful Star Wars film ever written, all while boldly overstepping the *status quo* of the films that came before it. The film's success in theaters, without a doubt, was due to its authentic exploration of a dazzling variety of rich relationships – Jedi master and Padawan, magistrate and citizen, and mother and son – propelled by political intrigue, the struggle for justice, and bravery in the face of decimation. In short, Star Wars: The Phantom Menace is a cinematic masterpiece.

Though every character in the film bears a respectable developmental path which hardly deserves to be ignored, I have chosen in this paper to focus on the journey of Anakin Skywalker. Anakin, fittingly, had odd beginnings. On the arid planet of Tatooine, Schmi Skywalker conceived him immaculately. As she recounted to Qui-gon Jin, “There was no father”. Despite his undeniably special origin, Anakin was born into poverty. He and his mother were sold to Wotto, a disagreeable junk dealer and urchin of society. Forbidden to leave the planet, Ani and his mother must make a solace of their hell. Ani keeps himself busy . tinkering with droids, conversing with space pirates, and playing with his neighborhood friends. Together, he and his mother live in a humble, quaint sand hut near the outside of the city.

Anakin's beginnings provide us insight into our first two developmental themes. Our first theme is the effect of socioeconomic status (SES) on a child's development. It was discussed in class this semester that child's socioeconomic status can affect many aspects of its development. Because its family may not have access to nutrition and health care, the child may be persistently malnourished and

unhealthy. These disadvantages inevitably propagate into the child's cognitive development. If there are physical ailments inhibiting the brain from physically developing and growing, there is little hope the child will react well to intellectual stimulation. As a parallel struggle, it would be typical for Schmi to be too preoccupied by her job to provide Anakin the proper exposure of vocabulary. But the film tells a different story. Anakin amazingly overcomes his socioeconomic status. Anakin appears fit and active, and has developed healthy eating habits. He is seen showing Qui-gon fruit at the local market, as well as happily eating an organic meal at home. Anakin is very mentally active as well. It is evident that he acts as the house's "handy man". Additionally, Anakin is persistently tinkering with robotics, whether he is working on his protocol droid to assist his mother or laboring over his pod racer. Though it is unclear how much time Schmi can afford to spend with Ani, there is mutual and tender respect. In this regard, Anakin defied the statistics of his situation. Although he was subject to the dangers of growing up with a low socioeconomic status, he maintained a developmentally healthy lifestyle.

A second of aspect of development we must reconcile with Anakin's early life is the idea of family structure vs function. It was confirmed through class discussion that the function of a family is vastly more critical to a child's developmental health than that family's structure. It is how a family interacts with its members and extended members that determines the health of an environment, and not the structure itself. Anakin was raised by a single mother. Without a second parent, much strain can be perpetuated in household relationships as the single parent must walk the thin line between complete provider and imminent parent. Anakin's mother Schmi was, evidently, well equipped to for the task of raising him as a single parent. Strong, wise, collected, loving – these were all characteristics she modeled for young Anakin Skywalker. Schmi, in her strength, exemplified how a family's function can overcome shortcomings in its structure.

Anakin's life takes a dramatic turn upon his serendipitous union with Qui-gon Jin. Qui-gon, who is looking to replace a hyper drive on his getaway ship, happens to enter Wotto's shop. In this

scene, Anakin also meets Padame for the first time. Here, we get a humorous glimpse at the social skills Anakin has acquired up to this point. In class, many aspects of social skills were discussed. These included managing emotions, reading others' emotions, nonverbal communication, conversation, listening, personal space, and approaching others. Anakin sees Padame enter his shop, and without hesitation asks “Are you an angel?” Padame, flustered by the odd inquiry, does her best to respond just as playfully, remarking, “You're a silly little boy.” Throughout the conversation, Anakin demonstrates good listening skills, respect for personal space (despite his immediate infatuation for Padame), and conversational rhythm. Although his introduction was odd, Anakin establishes a rapport of potential with Padame and her crew using his charming personality.

Following introductions, a dust storm drives Qui-gon and his crew into Anakin's home, where his mother Schmi welcomes them with a gentle heart. Here, as Anakin eagerly gives Padame a tour of his humble living quarters, we are given a glimpse into the fourth concept – Erikson's stage of industry vs. inferiority. According to Erikson's theory, children at around the age of Anakin become gripped with their own competence. This is the central task they are given, and if they fail, they must compromise with inferiority. Anakin loves to tinker. Mechanical robot parts, shop tools, and machines fill the floor and walls of his bedroom. It is quite evident that Anakin is fixated on his own mastery of skills. Anakin is working on a scanner to find the slave chip implanted in him and his mother, building a protocol droid to help around the house, and constructing a pod racer all while working in Wotto's shop. Additionally, Anakin is eager to show off his accomplishments, reminding his mother and informing his guests of all the things he is working on. He enjoys the viscous competition of intergalactic high-stakes pod racing, priding himself in being the “only human that can race pods”. Throughout the race, Anakin demonstrates a high level of dexterity and competence, using his sharp instincts to subdue his competitors and win his freedom – all while retaining unflinching optimism and confidence. Erikson, along with his mother, would be proud.

Lastly, we find the fifth and final theme of developmental psychology. We are given intimate insight into Anakin's high level of morality while he is speaking with Qui-gon Jin. According to Kohlberg, there is the pre conventional stage (which includes obedience and self interested perspective), conventional (which includes interpersonal relationships and social order), and post conventional (which includes higher universal ethical principles). When Anakin is confronted with the choice to leave with Qui-gon, he reveals that his motivation to develop his supernatural gifts and train as a Jedi is primarily motivated by a post conventional moral perspective. Anakin reminds his mother, "the biggest problem in the universe is that no one helps each other." Anakin has a remarkably giving spirit and, according to Kohlberg's scheme, a very highly developed moral attitude. Anakin is motivated by helping others, ultimately aspiring to return to his home planet and, championing his Jedi training, free his fellow slaves.

In studying Anakin's behavior in *The Phantom Menace*, I am led to conclude his character is especially strong. Anakin overcomes the disadvantages of a low socioeconomic status and being raised by a single mother. Anakin also demonstrates an admirable eagerness for social interaction and a commendable determination to master his crafts. Lastly, Anakin shows great maturity in his understanding of universal ethical principles.

In *The Phantom Menace*, Anakin Skywalker illustrates healthy developmental behavior. Sadly, his pristine example quickly decays as he falls under the influence of Darth Sidious. The same is true for our lives – our development as people is never finished. The fruits of a healthy upbringing are always in danger of being rotted by a slothful adolescence and a hateful adulthood. Anakin, a gleaming, optimistic, and deeply moral boy was corrupted – forsaking his roots to become one of the most evil tyrants in the galaxy. It is wise to always consider development as a process – never settling for who we are in the now, but pursuing who we could be.