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A Semiotic Analysis of *The Return*

Andrey Zvyagintsev's *The Return* is a disturbing story about the transition from innocence to experience. The plot revolves around two brothers who go on a confusing quest with their previously absent father. At first glance the film could be perceived as simplistic, but upon further interpretation it is highly allegorical. Through a semiotic analysis of the animal imagery, physical objects and natural elements, we will argue that the film is symbolically driven rather than plot driven.

Animal symbolism plays an important role in conveying the main theme. The first prominent animals are fish. To begin, the act of fishing represents the stereotypical activity that father and son share with one another. The two fish that we see in the film also parallel the two brothers; they are both caught and are suffocating from the tension with their father. Another group of animals worth analyzing are the birds. Birds are symbolic of hope, therefore when one of the boys finds a dead bird this foreshadows the outcome of the plot.

In the film, there are two physical objects that are overtly symbolic. These objects are the shoes that belonged to Ivan, as well as the watch that belonged to the father. In the film the father ominously repeats to Ivan "take off your shoes". After the father falls to his death Andrey repeats the same phrase. Traditionally, shoes represent power and authority. Towards the beginning of the film it is clear that the father has control and

authority over his two sons. After he dies, however, his eldest son steps into the role of the “man of the house.” Another prevalent symbol is that of the watch. The watch is symbolic of time and acts as a tool for the father to keep his children in line. He uses time as a means to punish them and restrict them from rebelling against him.

Finally, the characters can represent different classical elements that emphasize their personality and role. The youngest brother, Ivan, is represented by fire, which is symbolic of anger, hate and passion, whereas the father, Otets, is represented by water. For example, Ivan does not want to jump into the water in the opening sequence because it represents his father and he is reluctant to forgive him for leaving them. Ivan is also initially afraid of the water and heights, however, near the end of the movie, Ivan stoically stands up to him and we can see that he is now prepared to jump off the tower and confront his fear of heights, thus his father. The older of the two brothers, Andrey, represents the air element, which is freedom of spirit, because he constantly changes opinions about his father, sometimes agreeing with him and other times siding with his brother, Ivan.

The film’s effect depends on the viewer’s interpretation of the symbolism. The animal symbolism of the fish emphasizes the parental bond, or lack thereof, and tension between the brothers. The birds represent hope and foreshadow the ending of the film. The shoes indicate the transfer of authority from the father to Andrey, and the watch represents the approaching punishment of the sons. Furthermore, the natural elements highlight each character’s state of mind. All of these elements combined create a highly uncomfortable and thought provoking film.

Works Cited

The Return. Dir. Andrey Zvyagintsev. Ren Film, 2003. Film.