

MICHAEL CORLEONE

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Humanities in Psychology

Character of Michael Corleone from *The Godfather*

The Godfather (1972) received ten Academy Award nominations and won 3 Oscars. The \$134 million box office hit is set in the late 1940s NYC to the mid 1950s- over a 10 year period. The film, which centers on the Corleone crime “family,” is a detailed study of: violence, power, loyalty, honor, corruption, justice and crime in America. Gangster films are one of the oldest film genres, dating back to the early 1930s, with such stars as Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart. *The Godfather* succeeded in elevating the classic gangster film to a higher level, by depicting the gangster figure as a tragic hero. No one watching the film can deny that the character of Vito Corleone was likeable and almost familiar to us. The film is characterized by superb acting, and is a deep study of the emotional, physical and psychological conflicts endured by the members of the Corleone “family.” No single character experiences a deeper transformation in the film than that of Michael Corleone, portrayed by Al Pacino.

In an almost Jekyll to Hyde metamorphosis the film depicts the pain and discomfort Michael Corleone feels, as he accepts the fact that he is becoming everything he has sworn against. After having studied a number of theories in Developmental Psychology this semester, I sat down and watched *The Godfather* again, and was amazed at how I had gained new insights into the character of Michael Corleone. Very early in the film, we are introduced to Michael Corleone, when he attends the wedding of his sister at the family home. He is dressed in

uniform, as he has just returned from WWII as a highly decorated (Navy Cross) Marine captain. Michael is the twenty five year old Americanized, youngest son of Vito Corleone. He is Ivy League and Dartmouth educated, and is completely uninvolved in the family business. Michael exudes decency, innocence and naiveté as he tells his date, Kay Adams, about how the Don's godson was helped by his father. Michael explains, "Luca Brasi held a gun to his head, and my father assured him that either his brains-or his signature- would be on the contract . . . That's a true story. . . That's my family, Kay. It's not me." It is here that we first get introduced to Michael's issues with his identity.

Michael is an enigmatic character whose identity crisis probably emerged in his teenage years when he was discouraged from following in the footsteps of the Don, his father, whom he most identified with. Vito was a strong paternal figure and Michael was the closest to him in terms of cunning and intelligence. Don Vito recognized these qualities in young Michael and dissuaded him at every turn. Michael was confronted with a conflict, and joined the Marines in an attempt to establish his own identity outside of the influence of his powerful patriarch. However, subconsciously, Michael valued the qualities he was taught by his father, such as loyalty- and so he transferred these feelings from loyalty to family, to loyalty to country. It is interesting to hear Michael chastise his brother, Fredo, years later, when he tells him, "Fredo- you're my brother and I love you, . . . but never take sides with anyone against the family again."

A pivotal scene in the movie is when Michael visits his father in the hospital after having survived an attempted assassination. Michael arrives to find the hospital isolated and no one guarding his father. It is here that Michael makes a promise to his father that he will not let anything happen to him. Almost immediately Michael realizes that he must step into a new identity if he is going to be able to fulfill that promise. With a hardened and almost stoic persona

Michael outwits the assassins and demonstrates that he has learned quite a bit about “playing” the game. From this point in the film Michael sheds the docile covering that was his “All-American” image, and adopts the values and norms of the seedy underworld. The transformation is best exemplified in the following exchange of dialog between Michael and Kay. It has been a few years since the afternoon of his sister’s wedding and Michael is seeing Kay for the first time.

Michael Corleone: "My father is no different than any powerful man, any man with power, like a president or senator."

Kay Adams: "Do you know how naive you sound, Michael? Presidents and senators don't have men killed!"

Michael Corleone: "Oh. Who's being naive, Kay?"

It is also interesting to study the morality of the character of Michael Corleone. Michael’s morality seems to change as his identity shifts. In the beginning of the movie Michael’s morality seems to reflect what Kohlberg would call Level III- Post- Conventional, Autonomous or Principled level morality. As defined by stage 6: **The universal ethical-principle orientation-** this absolute morality is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles that appeal to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. By the end of the movie as Michael’s loyalty shift from country to family, his morality becomes relative. Michael stands Godfather to his sister’s baby as his minions wipe out his enemies and secure his absolute power. He is now at what Kohlberg would define as level I- Pre-conventional. In stage 1: **The punishment and obedience orientation-** the physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. With such a dramatic and protracted change in morality and personality, it is worthy to state that Michael Corleone had become two different people. Could he have been suffering from a psychological disorder, such as Borderline Personality Disorder, Multiple Personality or Schizoid Personality Type?

