THELMA & LOUISE: A JOURNEY OF CHANGE

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Besides their location, there are many things that change about Thelma and Louise when they decide to leave their small Arkansas town for the weekend. Prior to their departure, they lead mundane lives that they weren’t exactly pleased with. While Louise works as a waitress in a restaurant, Thelma stays at home and deals with mistreatment from her overbearing husband, Darryl. Nevertheless, they have each other to lean on, and their close friendship is what gets them through a whirlwind of unexpected twists and turns throughout their journey. As their bond is continually revealed throughout the film, we see changes in their individual personalities and attitudes.

Thelma begins the movie with a rather naïve personality and a sheltered way of life. Louise practically seems like a big sister at times, as she has been through more experiences, which have greatly challenged her emotional strength. Their unique personalities serve as a source of light humor in the beginning of the movie, but as unexpected obstacles stand in their way, they continue to rise to the occasion in their own ways, and at different points in the film. It is obvious that a definite change has taken place when one compares Thelma and Louise in the beginning with the Thelma and
Louise at the end, and not just one change, but a series of ongoing struggles. As I study the characters that come in and out of their lives, the events they must face, and finally causal relations, I will discover how Thelma and Louise have evolved throughout the movie. I will do this through the method of Narrative criticism.

**THE METHOD OF CRITICISM**

There are several steps involved with creating a narrative criticism. After an artifact has been selected, which in this case it’s Thelma and Louise, the critic will begin analyzing the artifact. First of all, this means identifying the dimensions of the narrative. There are a variety of aspects that one could look at, but not all are necessarily relevant to all artifacts. For example, for this criticism I have chosen to look at characters, events, and causal relations. Things such as temporal relations or audience were things that I could have studied at as well. Then the critic needs to use those dimensions as a means for discovering an explanation for the narrative. Through looking at things like intensity and frequency, purpose, or coherence, one can come up with a more effective explanation. Finally the critic will decide on a research question and then develop an essay that works toward answering that question.

**ANALYSIS**

*Characters*

The male supporting characters in Thelma and Louise function to move the plot along and bring about some of the changes in both of the main characters. In this part of my analysis I would like to look at Darryl, Harlan, and J.D. First of all we have Darryl,
Thelma’s husband. With a guy like him, it’s no wonder why Thelma is so eager to get away and experience life for herself. He shows a real lack of respect for Thelma as a person when he tries to control what she does. For example when Thelma was away, he treated her like a child when he demanded that she return home immediately. He is highly insensitive and uncaring for Thelma’s needs, and the level of control he has before Thelma leaves compared with the freeness she has while she’s gone creates a very obvious contrast that the viewers can easily see. He shows much concern for having her back at home, but it seems to me that it’s because simply wants to regain control.

Another male character whose performance greatly affected the remainder of the plot was Harlan. Harlan was a man that Thelma and Louise encountered when they decided to stop at a saloon after their departure from home. Thelma just wanted to let loose and have a good time, and after she had a few drinks in her she was more than willing to dance with Harlan. Louise seemed skeptical, but let Thelma have her fun. After Harlan got Thelma liquored up to the point that she felt sick, he took her outside for some “fresh air”. At this point he began taking advantage of her and started to rape her, and then Louise came to the rescue. At first he didn’t seem to take her seriously until he saw her gun, and even then he continued to make insensitive comments, then Louise shot him. Harlan sees women as objects, not as real people with feelings. It was this attitude that brought such fear out of Thelma, and brought back memories for Louise of a similar situation she had encountered in Texas. As soon as he was shot, the concept of Thelma and Louise being out on their own and on the run from the law really began to take shape. And the fact that Harlan was a male character that was doing them wrong reiterated their
struggle with male dominance. Harlan also triggered a change in Thelma that would continue to develop as the movie continued.

J.D., the young cowboy, was a very misleading character in this film. This was a character that they encountered at a gas station, and Louise was skeptical of him. After they first turned him down on a ride, they saw him once more and decided to pick him up. J.D. obviously knows how to use his looks and charm to get on a woman’s good side, and though Thelma’s skin had gotten a little thicker after the encounter with Harlan, she still had an attraction to J.D. that she couldn’t ignore. When he came back to their hotel room on that rainy night, Thelma appeared to be hanging on every word he said. As he told stories about his armed robbery experiences, you’d think that Thelma might want to keep an eye on Louise’s cash that was sitting on the table. Unfortunately, that was probably one of the last things on Thelma’s mind during her and J.D.’s night of passion. The next morning, after being prompted by Louise, she finally figured out that J.D. had totally fooled her. J.D.’s role in the movie brought about the most major change in Thelma and Louise. Louise, who had tried to be in control of all the events until this point, had finally broken down and it was time for Thelma to rise to the occasion and take control.

Events

Events can be split up into major events (kernels) and also minor events (satellites). As I studied several of the key characters that Thelma and Louise encountered, I described several major events at the same time. So for this part of the analysis, I would like to look at some of the more minor events, or satellites, and see how
they are also crucial in connecting the main events to one another. I also hope to describe how they also hold significance pertaining to the changes that Thelma and Louise undergo. First I would like to look at Thelma’s response to the event with Harlan.

After the situation with Harlan, Thelma thought it would probably be a good idea to tell the police. This demonstrates her initial naïve outlook on life, and Louise was painfully aware of this. She knew that when they had been dancing together all night for everyone to see, there wouldn’t be a whole lot of pity for Thelma. And the fact of the matter is that Louise had just killed someone, so she obviously wouldn’t get off free no matter how honest they wanted to be to the cops. Louise knew that they had a problem on their hands, and she indicates that she has been through something like this before, so it gave her even more of a reason to have such a passionate response. I feel that both women’s responses to Harlan told a lot about them as people as well as their experiences.

Another minor event that I think is worth looking at is when Thelma robbed the store. The fact that Thelma was of a mindset to do this is a total change in itself. I think she felt that this was their only hope because she saw Louise in such a broken down state. This part is rather critical because it shows the flip-flop in roles of the two women. Thelma had to step up and be the problem solver, and she also had the knowledge that it was basically her fault that the money was even taken. That gave her even more motivation to make things better. She proceeded to rob the store like a seasoned veteran, and left Louise wondering what in the world had just happened. Also, the way Thelma dealt with the cop who pulled them over showed the snowballing effect of committing crime and Thelma and Louise getting in deeper and deeper trouble.
A final event that needs to be recognized is the very end of the film. Thelma and Louise are being chased by the cops and this time there is nothing they can do to change things. Would the women we saw at the beginning of the film have done this? I don’t think I could see it happening. Over the course of the film, they both not only developed a thicker skin, but a closer bond as well. I think they both developed a renewed respect for one another. Though they were both best friends before, I think Louise knew that Thelma didn’t have the same level of maturity or experiences as she did. This is why she appeared to be playing the big sister role. Thelma also gained insight into Louise’s past in Texas, and they were able to relate to one another in that way. Going off the cliff together showed a relationship that was the best it could be as well as utmost appreciation for one another as people.

*Causal Relations*

Causal relations refers to what causes what throughout the plot. I think this is highly applicable to this film because all of the events are clearly connected to one another. First of all, the women’s poor situations at home cause them to want to leave and go on vacation, and since it’s a vacation they obviously want to stop and have some fun. Well that gets them into trouble because, in a nutshell, Harlan’s idea of a good time didn’t coincide with theirs, so he got shot. How they are on the run and need some money so they’ll make it to Mexico. Along the way their money gets taken by an attractive outlaw named J.D., so they have to steal more money. After that event they are easily identified by investigators and they are sort of past the option of just turning themselves in. Many plots in stories have connections with one thing leading to another,
but in this movie, it seems like they just don’t have many options to accompany the
different events. Various things happen to them out of obligation, however these are
obligations that they have subconsciously readied themselves for as they have toughened
up and grown as people.

**CONCLUSION**

Change is something that is constantly going on in the movie Thelma & Louise.
However this is not merely a change in plot or setting, it is a change in the main
characters themselves. I recognized this change by looking at the movie through several
different dimensions in a narrative analysis. First I analyzed several key supporting
characters that affected Thelma and Louise at different points throughout the movie. The
three I looked at were Darryl, Harlan, and J.D. As I studied these characters, I also
revealed the main events, or kernels, that they were involved in. Next I decided to
continue to look at events, but this time I wanted to gain a better understanding of the
more minor, yet still significant parts known as satellites.

There was so much significance in so many parts of the movie, it is hard to call
anything minor, but these events were things that didn’t introduce a new character. It
was more or less an event between Thelma and Louise, and these events were the
reactions after Harlan was shot, the robbing of the store, and the very end of the movie.
Lastly, I felt it was necessary to review the causal relations in this movie, because I felt
like while I was watching the movie, I was making so many connections in my mind
regarding one event causing another. So many events play off of one another, and since
Thelma and Louise seem to have decided that they aren’t going to turn themselves in,
they feel obligated to do many of the things they do. Still, they gained strength and stronger bond. Fortunately at the end, the changes they went through gave them confidence that though their journey would end, their friendship would stand the test of time.