

INITIATION OF CHANGE: A BIBLICAL DEPICTION OF WATER IN *AMERICAN HISTORY X*

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Abstract: This article analyzes water symbolism in the *American History X* film from a biblical point of view using Film Studies through the narrative element and various cinematic devices such as shots, camera angles, lighting, and color. *American History X*, aired more than 20 years ago, brings up the story of how Derek, a white supremacist changes his racist perspective and leaves his prejudiced old life. While there have been previous studies discussing cinematic seduction and movie themes, this article will explore the symbolism of water through a Christian lens, mainly examining the cinematic construction of shots, camera angles, lighting, and color. This article finds that water symbolizes change in Derek's life, perspective, and goals. Water refers to baptism as the symbol of Derek's first step toward redemption from his Neo-Nazi life. Just like someone who gets baptized, Derek gets a new chance at life and leaves the old ways. Baptism from Christianity perspective has elements of blood and sacrifice which are also present in Derek's baptism. Derek's Christ-like figure in his life is his brother, Danny. Derek is the one being saved because of the change in his life, and Danny is the sacrificial lamb, and the consequences Derek has to face because of his old life.

Keywords: *American History X*, baptism, change, film, water, racism, religion symbolism

American History X (1998) directed by Tony Kaye brings up the story of racism and the white supremacist movement. Gooding, (2015) in his article said that the *American History X* movie is still an important film as society nowadays is still fighting for equality and civil rights till now. Both Kirkland (2018) and Joudrey (2023) in their web article discuss how even 20 years after its release the topic of racism in America is still the same. *American History X* movie can be seen as the reflection of society in America in that era (in the 90's) and also the society in America nowadays. The movie follows Derek's journey from a white supremacist skinhead to a reformed person who realizes the errors of his racist worldview and tries to prevent his brother, Danny, from following in Derek's footsteps. The white supremacist movement in *American History X* is historically tied to White Christianity in America since the chattel slavery era, because of the use of baptism to prolong the white people's position in power over the black people (Grimes, 2017). Unsurprisingly, *American History X* has many religious symbols throughout the film—for example, Derek's messiah pose, water, Derek's tattoos, blood, and birds. In most popular Hollywood films, according to Kozlovic (2007), there are three types of sacred/religious input in cinema: (1) holy plotlines, (2) divine symbolism, and (3) sacred subtexts—defined as the Christ-figure. By focusing on the way water is pictured in *American History X*, this research studies what water symbolizes in this film through biblical interpretation using film elements.

From all the divine symbols in the film, water in *American History X* plays an important part in Derek's story. Water is mentioned quite a lot in the Bible, as water represents a lot of meaning. Moses, in his article on *Water and Scriptures* (Raju & Manasi, 2017) explains that water can be seen as a blessing, a cleansing and rescuing force, and healing abilities, but also symbolizes destruction and power. Essentially water, in the biblical context, is seen to change the lives of those who receive it. In the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments mention 'living water'. While living water in the Old Testament refers to rivers and any non-stagnant water body and also refers to salvation for the people, in the New Testament 'living water' refers to the Spirit of God. The importance of water in the bible translates to be a tradition in the Church to be used as a medium for important Christian rituals such as baptism. The word baptism comes from the Greek word '*baptô*' which means 'to wash'. In Christianity to be baptized is more than an initiation ritual or purification washing (Castleman, n.d.), it means to bury the old life/person and be reborn as a new person, 'Sprinkled with the blood of Christ, our hearts have been made free from a guilty conscience, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.....' Hebrews 10:22 (*Holy*

Bible, 2006). Water in Christianity is essential and this importance gives a solid symbolism to Derek's character development in *American History X*.

Mainly due to its focus on the theme of racism, *American History X* can be said to still be relevant to American society even now. The movie's story follows the change of the main character, Derek, and Danny, Derek's brother, to leave the white supremacist life. To communicate this narrative, *American History X* uses Christian symbols throughout the movie where Danny can also be considered as Christ ("*American History X-Part I – Liquor & Christianity*," n.d.). Water especially, plays a significant role in Derek's character development. In order to fully explore the symbolism of water, this research uses Film Studies approach to examine the religious symbols in *American History X*. Film analysis involves breaking down a sequence, a scene, or an entire movie to identify the tools and techniques that compose it (Barsam & Monahan, 2019). By breaking down a scene, understanding what water symbolizes in *American History X* can be analyzed mainly through the use of cinematic devices such as mise-en-scene, shot angle, and the narrative elements of this film. Looking through the mise-en-scene, this research is going to focus on the shot, camera angle, color, and lighting to find what water represents in *American History X*.

In most of the previous studies, many articles talk about the theme of the *American History X* movie or Derek's character as the white supremacist. Prorokova (2015) in their film review stated that *American History X* is an anti-racism film that follows the story of Derek Vineyard who was a Neo-Nazi full of hatred, then going through a change in point of view when he goes to prison. However, Derek, the white supremacist character gets more voice and screen time than the opposing view. Grau (2010) pointed out that Derek's characterization in *American History X* helps to make a captivating narrative to show a realistic and gradual process for his change of heart in his way of life as part of the cinematic manipulation. Looking at the trend of the millennial movies from 1997-2000 when *American History X* was released, films with religious content were quite popular (Drumheller, 2005). Feit (2004) also discusses that in the Millennial era, there were a lot of films that put sacred symbols and religious depictions even though the main content was not religious. *American History X* fits what Feit discusses in the study. However, not a lot has been discussed about *American History X* and the religious symbols in the film. A website article analyses *American History X* in view of Jewish Esotericism and delves into the Aryan Brotherhood ("*American History X-Part I – Liquor & Christianity*," n.d.).

This research therefore seeks to expand on the discussion of previous studies' racist elements and film narrative, using the Christian perspective in the symbols that appear throughout the movie as previous study has yet to discuss this. In order to do this, this study is going to study what water symbolizes through biblical interpretation and its correlation to the *American History X* movie themes using film studies looking through color, camera angle, setting, shot, and lighting.

METHOD

This research uses a Film Studies approach, focusing on the analysis of mise-en-scène, looking mainly through cinematic aspects of color, camera angles, setting, shot, and lighting. Film studies deal with the problems of reality and representation by making an initial assumption that all representations have meaning (Sikov, 2020). According to Barsam & Monahan (2019), a film's mise-en-scène is everything we see in every shot.

This research is looking through a biblical interpretation to understand the incorporation of symbols in the depiction of water in *American History X* and its correlation to the theme of the film by integrating the study of Christianity and the Bible into mise-en-scene analysis. *American History X* doesn't refer to a specific denomination of Christianity. For this reason, this research looks at the symbolism of water in Christianity from a general Christian understanding but mostly refers to the Easy to Read Version (ERV) Bible and Catholic understanding of baptism as the Christian perspective for understanding the biblical aspect of water. The ERV Bible is a legitimate English translation Bible by the World Bible Translation Center. The ERV Bible can be used and understood by all denominations of Christianity and the general readers of this article.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Water in *American History X* is intertwined with the main character, Derek, and Danny, Derek's brother. *American History X* follows the story of the main character, Derek, who changes from his old life as a white supremacist to the complete opposite. These changes in particular arguably can be seen after Derek's rape in the prison bathroom. This notable scene highlights the ever-present water in the scene. Water in this scene symbolizes the start of change in Derek's life. With the relation of trends in Hollywood movies to put sacred symbolism inside the plot and the historically tied white supremacist movement with Christianity, water is then understood as symbolizing the baptism of Derek to become a new person.

Water & Initiation of Change

Derek's first step to change happens in the prison bathroom. After getting assaulted and raped by fellow White inmates, Derek's resolve to leave behind the Neo-Nazism movement becomes stronger. Derek's humiliation in the prison bathroom happens as the water that turns on keep flowing from the start of the rape till Derek is left alone bleeding on the bathroom floor. The bathroom as a place to clean oneself becomes the place of filth for Derek, but water keeps flowing as he is unconscious and bleeding on the floor. Water washes away Derek's blood, symbolizing the baptism that washed away Derek's sins. Baptism as an initiation ritual for people to wash their sinful past and lead a new life in Christianity (Raju & Manasi, 2017), makes the bathroom scene push for Derek to change and begin his new life away from the white supremacists.

American History X is told using two color schemes: a black-and-white part representing the past which is Derek's life before prison and sometime during in prison, and a full-color part following Danny's ongoing life in the and Derek's life after prison. According to Barsam & Monahan (2019), the monochromatic color scheme is often used to show memories, flashbacks, and historical events. The use of monochromatic cinema was popular around the 1930s-1960s, used in this film to show the audience that every time the screen is in black and white, the film wants to show Derek's 'past' history and the violence in Derek's life. While not a Film Noir, the black-and-white part of *American History X* follows some of the plot structures such as nonchronological narrative and goal shifting to create a sense of disorientation (Barsam & Monahan, 2019; Brown, 2016), especially the sense of loss of ideals that Derek feels. In this black-and-white part of the film, Derek's change happens.

In the prison bathroom scene, in the beginning, Derek takes a shower with the other prisoners. Derek stands in front of the shower stall with Derek's head bowed down under the shower fully wet with water cascading on the face (Image 1). Notably, this is a similar position when one receives baptism. Traditionally, baptism is done by immersion in water, but the majority of the Church does it by effusion "pouring the water three times over the candidate's head." (Vatican, n.d.), such as happening in this scene. This scene depicts how water is used as a symbol, a sacred means to conduct baptism to cleanse one's sin.



Image 1. Derek takes a shower (01:25:06)

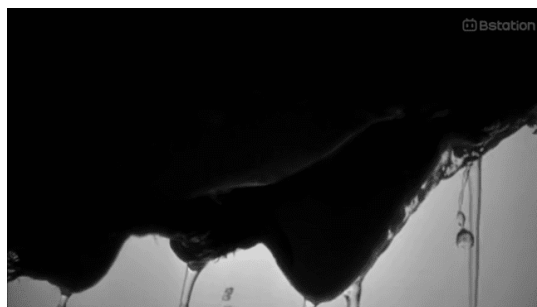


Image 2. An extreme close-up of Derek's head under the running water (01:25:11)

An extreme close-up shot with eye-level angles of Derek's face then happens, as shown in Image 2. This shot creates a personal moment as the whole scene focuses on Derek and the water. This type of shot builds significance to the audience of the relationship between Derek and the water. Also, give a highlight on the water as well as Derek's head position of bowing deeply, interpreted here as starting to show doubts and regret that then becomes the starting point of his later redemption. In this point of view of redemption them, the shot can be seen as Derek's early admission of him starting to change of heart when it comes to his ways of being a believer in racist white ideology, leading a neo-nazi gang, and doing brutality to defend his racist beliefs. This is because the story at this point shows Derek having disagreements with his neo-Nazi prison gang, because the gang chooses to deal with non-Whites as equals, in opposition to Derek's idealistic understanding of white race superiority. Water as the media is used to wash, is a symbolic foreshadowing of Derek later completely washing his old fault of supporting the white supremacist movement. Derek's disappointment over the dealings with the Latino prisoners for the survival of the White supremacists makes him start to avoid the other White prisoners. A discussion takes

place before this scene with Lamont, an African American convict who is Derek's laundry duty mate, about prison sentences as Lamont unfairly got 6 years for dropping the TV that he stole on a policeman, and Derek got 3 years for killing Black people. This has opened Derek's eyes to the unfairness in race dealings that happened in American society and this increases Derek's understanding and his being receptive to people of other race. Hence, water in this scene symbolizes the first step of change in Derek's life.

The true change point in Derek's life happens when he is raped in the middle of taking a this shower. In Image 3, this scene shows a medium shot frame with an eye-level camera angle and Derek is centered on the screen as the focus.



Image 3. Derek gets raped in the prison bathroom. (01:25:19)

This frame shot shows the character from head to waist and the eye-level camera angle is a standard default setting in a film useful in telling the story development (Barsam & Monahan, 2019). Another character also appears on the left of the screen, holding Derek against the bathroom wall. Derek is held against the wall between two shower stalls with water still running at the shower stall on the right side of the frame, where Derek previously showered. All the characters who appear on the screen are naked. Derek's expression appears to be scared and also angry. The scene overall focuses on the action of the rape. The setting of this scene is a bathroom, a place to wash and clean oneself.

To be raped in the middle of the shower by fellow Neo-nazis/white supremacists can be understood as a necessary action which propels Derek to swear off any white supremacist ideology in his life. As water becomes the symbol wrapping around Derek during the rape incident, the presentation of the rape also signals the action of baptism. In Christian understanding, the first baptism happens in the Jordan River, then to be an example for those who want to walk in the right way "...Jesus answered, "Let it be this way for now. We should do whatever God says is right." Then John agreed..." Matthew 3:13-17 (Holy Bible, 2006). According to Bickel (1995), early baptism customs state that people receive baptism in the form of nakedness, and then are given a white garment after the baptism. In the prison shower scene, almost all inmates are either naked or use white towels to cover their private parts. Derek was naked as he was showering. What is that mean to be a symbol of purity or a condition to be ready to purify, the nakedness in this scene is to humiliate especially with the rape and assault that follow. A bath or a shower, a ritual that means to clean becomes something that stains Derek. The attack comes as a tool to control and show how neo-Nazism affects Derek's life. But in the end, Derek's resolve to be better gives Derek a chance to have a clean state.



Image 4. An insert showing running water from the shower stall (01:25:47)

As the rape is happening, the water from the shower stall is still turned on, as shown in the screenshot Image 4. Therefore, water is shown to continually exist during this scene while Derek gets dirty by the rape, his change of heart, and his original purpose to be clean still come through.

As the story develops, this sexual attack becomes the main motivation for Derek's leaving his racist beliefs and gangs, and marks the moment when Derek grows, changes, and finally leaves the white supremacist lifestyle. Derek's journey of change starts in the prison bathroom, as Derek first experiences doubts, and he

contemplates and later regrets his old way of being a white supremacist. The shower is understood as an initiation, a baptism to take a step to leave the white supremacist life, a decision that is already strong in Derek, especially after Derek befriended Lamont, Derek's laundry mate. Derek's rape incident in the bathroom by the other white prisoners sealed Derek to be an anti-white supremacist movement.

The Waters of the Sea as Symbolism of Innocence

As a changed man, Derek got a new life with a new way of life. After Derek gets out of prison, there is a flashback scene of a childhood memory of Derek playing near the sea. In a flashback scene of Derek's childhood, taken in a long shot with low camera angle, with mainly sepia color scheme. The longshot is used to establish show the point-of-view of a child who is quite active and unsteady, adding the low camera angle, and the use of the sepia color scheme cement this scene to be one of Derek's childhood memories.



Image 5. Derek's memory of childhood near the sea. (01:42:50)

The lighting in this scene is soft/diffused and warm from the apparent sunset, giving this scene a dreamlike atmosphere. The warm light from the sunset also gives warmth and a happy feeling to the scene. It is a long shot frame, where the full body of the boy and the background of the sea is shown on the screen. In the background, one bird is flying, and the waves from the sea are shown. It is important to note here that water in the form of the sea is present and its presence is overwhelming. Derek's growth and change after prison, give him a chance for a new life. He buried his old self and emerged as a new person. The flashback of childhood memory is a sign that Derek got his innocence back and is now ready to start his new life. Water in the form of the sea enveloping the boy Derek in this scene serves as the symbolic backdrop of innocence where his childhood began.

Water, Blood, and Sacrifice

Water symbolizes Derek's baptism to become a new person, and in baptism, there are aspects of blood and sacrifice. From a Christian perspective, Baptism is not done without the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus sacrificed Himself, and shed His blood, to save humanity from sin (Romans 5:8). Derek's change or baptism to be a new person is not done without sacrifices. The rape incident may look like Derek has accomplished this aspect of baptism by his blood because of the assault, but the blood and sacrifice aspects are needed from the Christ-like figure in Derek's life.

In the aftermath of the rape, Derek is left alone naked, unconscious, and bleeding in the bathroom with water still flowing from the shower stall.



Image 6. The aftermath of the rape (01:26:12). Notice the Nazi tattoos and DOC tattoo on shoulder.

In Image 5, a long shot frame shows the full body of Derek lying face down on the bathroom floor, not awake. The angle of the camera in this scene is canted or in Dutch tilt, a position where the camera is tilted on the horizontal axis (Brown, 2016). The use of Dutch tilt, usually to create an impression of anxiety and disorientation. Using this type of camera angle helps cement what Derek experience in the assault as rape is a disoriented

experience where one is losing control of the body. Derek loses consciousness after the assault, can be seen as the death of his old self. In Romans 6:4 (*Holy Bible*, 2006) “When we were baptized, we were buried with Christ ... And just as Christ was raised from death ... so we can now live a new life.” Just as the verse states, the essence of being baptized is to ‘die’ to merge the old life, sin, and all with Christ, then emerge as a new person with a new life. For Derek to be saved, blood needs to be shed.

Another symbolism here is Derek’s tattoos. Racist tattoos in Derek’s life have been a part of his identity, and he was proud of it. Tattoos are often seen as threats, gangs, violence, and other negative connotations either in society or in media such as film (Nesselhauf, 2014). They are also seen as a way to express people’s identity and culture. The swastika tattoo over the heart, while originally symbolizing Derek following the way of Nazism, holds the spirit of Neo-Nazism close to the heart, which also resembles a Finnish cross (BBC, 2020). Another visible tattoo is the D.O.C (Disciple of Christ / Jesus), the name of the white supremacist gang that Derek had led before prison. Despite the name being the disciple of Jesus, this gang can be understood as not following any of the teachings from Jesus with their hatred and prejudice over race. After Derek’s change and redemption, the tattoos became a reminder of his old ways, “a prison” that he can not escape.

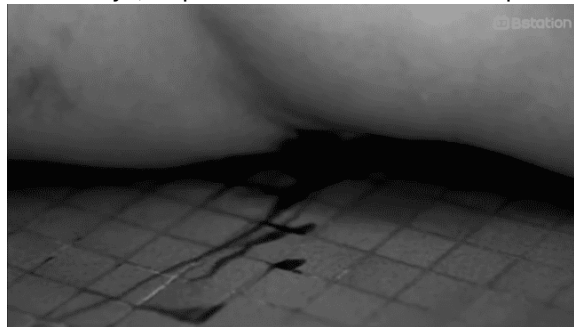


Image 7. An insert of the aftermath of the rape (01:26:12)

The rape scene also shows an insert shot where water and blood flow from Derek’s body as shown in Image 7. Throughout this scene, water and blood are flowing away from Derek’s body, as the water from the shower stall is on, which can be interpreted as an act of washing down Derek’s sin and fault. Water and blood are often mentioned in the bible as a pair in discussion of Christian baptism. In the Bible, to be baptized is to be cleaned of sin by Jesus as He “came by both water and blood” 1 John 5:6 (*Holy Bible*, 2006). With Derek both washed away by his own blood and the water from the shower, it can be seen that the baptism of Derek to be a new person is done. Another aspect of the baptism is to look into the family name “Vinyard,” understood as a shortened version of the word “vineyard”, a place where grapes are grown to make wine. Here, “vine” can be understood to signify Christ, as “I am the vine, and you are the branches...” found in the Bible, John 15:5 (*Holy Bible*, 2006). This symbolism can be understood to support the idea that the Vinyard brothers, Derek and Danny, are the Christ-like figures type as described by Kozlovic (2007). The parable of wine as the Blood of Jesus in the Last Supper, takes a closer Christian imagery of the identity of the Vinyard brothers, as blood later takes a symbolic meaning in the later scenes of the film that will be discussed.

Baptism in Christianity has Jesus who died and sacrificed Himself to save humanity. As Christ’s blood washed away humanity’s sins, so is Derek’s blood washed away after his rape, and Danny’s blood washed away Derek’s sins in later scenes. While Derek has changed and become a better person, he has also successfully helped Danny to leave the racist ideology. However, the past is catching up to Danny. Derek is a famous figure in the white supremacist movement in his town, and everyone knows who his family is. Danny, before and after Derek’s imprisonment, follows Derek’s steps, even when Danny needs to suffer a bloody death in his sacrifice to follow Derek’s actions.

Sacrifice in the New Testament (Eberhart, 2023), mostly refers to Jesus, but also about being reformed and transformed. Danny’s blood in the last scenes of his death in the film can be understood as a repayment, not a sacrifice like Christ’s, as a consequence of his following Derek’s previously racist ways. Derek had killed Black people because of racism and narrow perspective, now Danny got killed by other Black people for the same reason. The setting of “bathroom” again plays an important place of change in Derek’s new life appears again as “bathroom” is also a place where his brother lost his life. The setting also has some similarities with the setting of the bathroom where Derek is raped, where the walls are tiled, which, while not exactly the same, makes it easier for the audience to connect the place as “one” place.



Image 8. Danny gets shot at 01:52:19

This scene shows a long shot with an eye-level camera angle of Danny getting shot in the school bathroom. A long shot frame is when the character is shown in a more spatial context. The background of this scene is Danny's blood splattered widely on the wall and the urinal behind him. The blue shirt Danny wears is full of bloodstains from the gunshot wounds. Danny is centered on the screen as the focus, with his hands up fully seen on the frame to his waist as he, in slow motion, falls to the floor. As he falls, Danny's face shows a shocked and pained expression with some of the blood on his face. Danny's hands are up as he is thrown back by the impact of the three gunshots he received. Danny's pose with his hands up is roughly the imagery of the same pose of Christ on a cross. Reviewing back the name Vinyard, Danny becomes the obvious Christ-like figure in *American History X*. In 1 John 1:7 (Holy Bible, 2006), "... the blood sacrifice of Jesus, God's Son, washes away every sin and makes us clean" states clearly that Jesus's blood is a sacrifice to cleanse humanity's sin; here understood that this furthers the quality of Danny as the Christ-like image (8) in this case whose blood cleanses Derek's sins in the similar manner of Derek's baptism in the prison's bathroom.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Water in *American History X* symbolizes the change in Derek's life from a racist white supremacist to an anti-racist. Derek's coming to the shower, head bowed, fully under the water can be seen as Derek's change of heart when it comes to his old way of being racist. Water is used to wash and is symbolic of Derek washing his old fault of supporting the white supremacist movement. The assault in the bathroom by fellow white gang members strengthens Derek's resolve to be free from white supremacist ideals. The bathroom becomes Derek's place of baptism as a new individual, with a new perspective on life. Derek uses this new perspective in life to save his brother, Danny, by following in Derek's footsteps in the white supremacist movement. The name Vinyard has a close relation with the words 'vineyard' and 'vine' which are biblically used to describe Jesus Christ, making one of the brothers to be the Christ-like figure. Baptism with water comes with sacrifice to pay for Derek's sins, which means that Danny's blood as the Christ-like figure cleanses Derek's sins.

Regardless, research about sacred symbols in *American History X* is not limited to Christianity perspective and other divine symbols that are found. Future research may discuss symbolism in Derek's messiah-like pose, birds, Derek's tattoo, and the sea. Another aspect that future research may discuss is the use of star power of Edward Norton, the actor for Derek Vinyard, and Edward Furlong as Danny Vinyard, to further analysis of the film's impact and message.

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