Comparative Analysis

In the movie “A Few Good Men,” the idea of obedience is thoroughly examined in the situation of Lance Corporal Harold Dawson and Private Louden Downey. Both men were on trial for murder after they were ordered to perform a Code Red that resulted in the death of their fellow U.S. Marine. Their lawyers did not try to prove that they did not kill in the victim; however, they attempted to prove that the Code Red was justified because it was ordered by their superior officers. As the court case unravels, it is revealed that Dawson and Downey were given unambiguous orders to perform a Code Red on the soldier. Colonel Jessup, the officer that gave the order, was eventually charged with murder. Although they were found innocent of murder, Dawson and Downey were still dishonorably discharged for “conduct unbecoming a United States Marine.” This sentencing was ironically the result of their obedience to Colonel Jessup. Dawson, although devastated that he was to be discharged, understood why he was being punished. He explained to Downey, “We were supposed to fight for people who couldn’t fight for themselves” (A Few Good Men). Herbert Kelman and Lee, the authors of “The My Lai Massacre: A Military Crime of Obedience,” contribute reasoning as to why Dawson obeyed the lethal orders despite him knowing right from wrong. Erich Fromm also wrote an article concerning obedience, “Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem,” to explain the psychology behind orders. In the corresponding articles, three
processes—authorization, routinization, and dehumanization—are explained to be accountable for Dawson obeying Jessup despite his conflicting moral conscience.

Authorization, as defined by Kelman and Hamilton, is “when acts of violence are explicitly ordered, implicitly encouraged, tacitly approved, or at least permitted by legitimate authorities, people’s readiness to commit or condone them is enhanced” (139). In “A Few Good Men,” both Dawson and Downey are given a straightforward order by a lieutenant to conduct a Code Red on Santiago. Kelman and Hamilton would argue that this authorization by a superior figure weakened Dawson’s moral conscience, which is why he was able to perform the Code Red with little to no guilt. Also, due to the superiority of Jessup, Dawson and Downey were given no opportunity to refuse the attack. In his article, Erich Fromm states that, “not only is the capacity for disobedience the condition for freedom; freedom is also the condition for disobedience” (127). In the military, the soldiers are rarely given any freedom to do what they desire. Dawson’s situation was no different—he was given an order and he followed it to avoid repercussions. In his case, obedience to his own moral reasoning was not an option if he wanted to stay in the military. In addition to having limited freedom, Dawson most likely put his trust into Jessup since he was higher-ranked. Rather than doubting him, Dawson believed that Jessup knew what he was doing, so the Code Red was to be implemented for a valid reason. Authorization had a major impact on Dawson’s decision to be obedient, which is one of the justifications of why he complied to the orders.

In addition to getting permission to conduct a Code Red, Dawson’s actions can be explained by the routinization of giving the procedures. Routinization, another process involving obedience, is “transforming the action into routine, mechanical, highly
programmed operations” (Kelman and Hamilton 140-141). In the military, routinization is one of the most important elements in soldiers’ daily lives. Everything is always systematic—the military is most efficient that way. Code Reds are one of the various procedures that soldiers perform to keep the army in high regard. As stated by Corporal Jeffrey Owen Barnes in the film, Code Reds were performed for even minor mistakes, like falling behind in a run (A Few Good Men). Dawson could have become used to giving Code Reds without consequences, which is why he executed one on Santiago with no hesitation. Another possible explanation of Dawson’s actions, asserted by Fromm, is that “the organization man has lost the capacity to disobey, he is not even aware of the fact that he obeys” (128). Since he had been ordered to perform Code Reds so frequently, Dawson could have not recognized that he had a choice to refuse. Obeying a person with a higher rank was part of his everyday lifestyle, which is why he did not challenge the order. If Dawson had been given more freedom in his obedience to highly ranked colonels like Jessup, he likely would have disobeyed the Code Red order. In Dawson’s situation, his obedience could be justified by the superior figure that gave him authorization to carry out the Code Red.

Although authorization and routinization can be impactful on the obedient subject, dehumanization can be the final influence that can make the subject submissive to a higher power. During the dehumanization process, “the victims [are] stripped of their human status if they are to be subjected to systematic killing” (Kelman and Hamilton 141). The obedient subject views the victims as nonhuman species, making it easier for him/her to commit atrocities against them. Dehumanization was evident for Dawson when his superior officers continuously labeled Santiago as the “weak link” of the base.
Rather than seeing him as his equivalent peer, Dawson saw Santiago as a lesser being—one not as strong and valuable as other men at the base. He had no problem scaring Santiago since it would help the Marines be superior. In addition to Dawson dehumanizing Santiago, Colonel Jessup also saw him as a lesser being. Because Jessup had never actually met Santiago in person, he did not have a personal connection to him, which made it easier for him to order the malicious Code Red. In their article, Kelman and Hamilton reasoned that officials like Jessup “increasingly come to see their victims as bodies to be counted and entered into their reports” (142). The order had no implications for Jessup because he had no intimate connection to Santiago. If he had talked to Santiago before the order, Jessup most likely would have seen him as a human being rather than just another body. Both Jessup and Dawson had no conlictions about the Code Red order because they dehumanized Santiago, making it easier to be objective about his well-being.

All three of the processes discussed in “The My Lai Massacre: A Military Crime of Obedience,” and the aspects in “Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem” were undoubtedly displayed in A Few Good Men. Dawson, Downey, and the other military men that took a part in the Code Red were somehow connected to the concept of obedience. The three processes allowed the military men to behave in a manner that is different than usual. Dawson, the most dynamic character in the film, was especially influenced by the three factors. Considering he knew after the trial that he should have disobeyed the orders and protected Santiago, Dawson’s conscience had no part in the decision to obey Jessup. Both of the articles regarding obedience can be used to explain why Dawson did not conform to his own moral value when given the choice.
Authorization, routinization, and dehumanization were all prominent aspects that influenced Dawson’s thinking process, resulting in the death of Santiago.
Works Cited

