

Written originally as a sample essay for Media Studies, this review is a story and production element analysis of five key scenes.

M Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) is a carefully crafted return to the pure suspense style of horror film-making. A ghost story with some very modern twists, it uses an understated, quiet approach to build anticipation and dread in its audience. Throughout, Shyamalan's careful use of specific production techniques lends maximum impact to his own finely crafted story, wrenching out every fright for all they are worth.

From the opening scenes, Shyamalan's technique for manufacturing frights is made very clear. He paints with carefully chosen static shots, creating a sense of eerie anticipation. Dr Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) is celebrating with his wife, Anna, his winning of an award for services to psychiatry. The mood is warm, encouraged by golden firelight playing over the darkened gloom of their house, and the light use of sound effects keeps the viewer's focus on the dialogue. As the scene shifts towards the first moment of real tension – a former patient of Malcolm's, Vincent (Donnie Wahlberg), has broken in and is threatening violence – the lighting becomes much colder and harsher, and Shyamalan's camera breaks loose, the handheld cinematography sustained through to the scene's violent conclusion. Music, too, plays a part in this sequence, introducing itself at a moment of revelation as it will in scenes throughout the film. Malcolm, introduced as a caring practitioner in a loving marriage, is shot by this troubled youth, the act tarnishing his belief in himself as a flawless psychiatrist and putting the first splinter into his hitherto harmonious relationship with Anna.

Crowe's latest charge, nine-year-old Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), is the distant child of a single mother (Toni Collette) who has so abandoned the notion of fitting in that he pays a fellow student to pretend, for his mother's sake, to be his friend. Questioned in the classroom, Cole clashes with his teacher over the nature of the school buildings in centuries past, hinting at a secret knowledge that Cole possesses. He is bookish, almost nerdy, and the scene makes it clear that he does not enjoy confrontations. Cole tends to whisper his dialogue, and a later revelation suggests there are spirits he may not wish to disturb. He is an outcast, but it is only because of his initial problem that such confrontations as this one arise. The scene is played from his point of view, with shots of Cole and his classmates at a level angle while his teacher, standing, is viewed from a low angle. We are on his side, and the teacher appears threatening as he looms over Cole. Emphasised sound effects remind us that the music, when it comes, will be worth listening out for.

It is when Cole finally explodes, breaking out of the protection of his shyness, that the score adds to the weight of the tension at that moment.



Cole's secret is finally revealed in a moment that brings him and Malcolm much closer together. It is an important moment of revelation for both characters, a fact supported visually when a POV shot emphasises Malcolm moving physically closer to Cole. Singles become two-shots, and wider angles turn to close-ups and even extreme close-ups as more is revealed about the pair. Malcolm feels guilty about his failure with Vincent and the deterioration of his marriage, looking to Cole for a second chance. Cole reveals that he sees the ghosts of the dead, clarifying the mysterious problem that has been at the heart of his social dysfunction. The score again only intrudes on this quiet moment when Cole's supernatural revelation is heard, its rising intensity making it absolutely clear that this is a pivotal story point. Lighting is subdued in this scene, much darker than in the classroom confrontation, with a soft key light putting Cole at its visual heart.



With a new openness existing between Cole and Malcolm, they comfortably support each other at the funeral of a girl, Kyra (Mischa Barton), whose ghost has called on Cole for help. That assistance comes when Cole discovers an ornate box in her bedroom, an important element of its contents prefigured by dimly lit, spooky shots of Cole's search as viewed through shadowy marionettes dangling in the foreground. The videotape within reveals a tale of treachery and murder to Kyra's father, the flickering of the image on close-ups of his face granting him one last link with his daughter. Music is used more diversely in this scene, adding to the shock value of an early fright as well as underscoring the father's grief as he watches the video. Though the scene represents a chance for Cole to find a positive benefit to his supernatural ability, it also eases part of Malcolm's burden: he sees the results of a successful outcome with this patient.

Cole's obstacle as a character – dealing with his ability – is resolved fully when he is able to let his mother into his confidence. Malcolm's comes only with one last surprise: that Vincent's gunshot in fact killed him, and he is one of Cole's ghosts. The reason for his deteriorating marriage becomes

apparent, and he moves towards closure with this new knowledge in hand. Emphasis is placed on the state of his and Anna's marriage. Their wedding video plays throughout, heard even when it is not seen. As his wedding ring falls from her hand and under the chair, the sound effect of its roll builds anticipation towards a close-up of it sitting on the floorboards. A close-up of Malcolm's hand reveals the finger it used to be on. Closure comes from a communication of sorts between them; a close-up (with accentuated sound effect) of Anna's icy breath as she sleeps tells us she will hear his words. A close-up of Anna's smile as she tells Malcolm she loves him completes the moment. The image finally flashes to white, signalling the end of Malcolm's purgatory.

Shyamalan has, in *The Sixth Sense*, constructed a tense and effective ghost story that, because of its twists, rewards repeated viewing. It is clear that the filmmakers have put careful thought into every aspect of the production, getting the most out of the intriguing storyline and maintaining an appropriately spooky mood throughout. Though the final revelation is too laboured and Osment's endless whispering becomes annoying, Shyamalan and his team make much out of the minimalist style they have applied.