

# **The Terminator Film Summary**

## **The Terminator by James Cameron**

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Terminator Film Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Context.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Summary and Analysis.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Style and Cinematography.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Symbols.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Essay Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>

## Context

*The Terminator* was a low-budget science fiction flick that ended up becoming a smash hit at the box office. The film grossed thirty-eight million and paved the way for two successful sequels. The movie also made the relatively unknown Arnold Schwarzenegger into a major star, with his infamous line, "I'll be back," rising to ubiquity among viewers of all ages.

At the time of its release, director James Cameron's *The Terminator* resonated with audience members' surfacing fears about technology and robotics, especially in the United States. As machines began to take over more of the jobs traditionally completed by humans, some people were growing concerned that humans might eventually become obsolete. As a result, Cameron's timely film captured the imaginations of people around the world.

Cameron's wife, Gale Ann Hurd, bought the script of *The Terminator* for one dollar. However, Cameron was eventually sued by Harlan Ellison, a science fiction author, who accused him of plagiarizing from two of his scripts. The suit was settled outside of the courtroom, but newer copies of the film credit Ellison.

Originally, Arnold Schwarzenegger was asked to play the role of Kyle Reese. However, after reading the script, he requested the role of the Terminator instead. It is likely that the decision to play such a memorable part may have radically affected his career. Lance Henrikson was going to be asked to play the Terminator, but after Schwarzenegger's decision, he was left out of the cast.

*The Terminator* seeks to answer the question, "What would happen if machines began to act independently, like humans?" In response, the film seems to suggest that machines able to behave like humans would do many of the same things humans do, but with one notable exception: machines would lack any emotions of kindness. While humans fight each other, strive for power, and even kill one another sometimes, humans can also cooperate and treat each other with kindness and love. Machines do not have that capability.

*The Terminator* also examines the power of choice versus the possibility of predetermination. Do things happen because they must happen? Is there a destiny? Or, do our choices determine our future? The film, along with its sequels, both considers and attempts to answer these questions. However, the films also suggest that the answer lies mostly in the eyes of the beholder. At times, the films seem to contain contradictory viewpoints; viewers are left to determine what they believe to be the truth of the matter.

Although *The Terminator* did not win any Academy Awards, its sequel won four: Sound Effects Editing, Visual Effects, Best Makeup, and Best Sound. *The Terminator* did win three awards from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films: Best Makeup, Best Science Fiction Film, and Best Writing.

# Summary and Analysis

*The Terminator* begins with a flashback to Los Angeles in 2028 A.D. The city is completely dark. Machines are shining spotlights and shooting bullets into the rubble. As a slow bulldozer moves through the streets, it crushes the bones of the dead. A written message displays onto the screen; it says:

"The machines rose from the ashes of the nuclear fire. Their war to exterminate mankind had raged for decades, but the final battle would not be fought in the future. It would be fought here, in our present.

Tonight..."

The credits roll, and the rest of the story begins; it is 1:52 a.m. on a day in 1984, still in Los Angeles. A man driving a forklift is surrounded by electrical surges. Unsure of the cause, he gets out of the truck and walks away. A moment later, a nude man who is crouching unseen next to the forklift stands up: we meet the Terminator. As he walks down the road, he runs into several thugs hanging out in the streets. They ask him, "Hey, so it's a nice night for a walk, huh?" The Terminator repeats their comments back to them, then demands that they give him their clothes. They refuse, and he knocks out two of them. The other quickly begins to undress.

Elsewhere in the city, similar electrical surges occur, and another naked man appears on the street. This man, Kyle Reese, takes clothes from a homeless man before the police spot him and chase him through the streets. Reese barely escapes the police as he runs through a shopping mall. Reese finds a phone book in a phone booth and searches for the name "Sarah Connor." There are three listings.

The scene fades out, and we see a woman on her way to her job at a restaurant. She clocks in with a card that reads "Sarah Connor." Nearby, the Terminator steals a car and drives off. At the restaurant, Sarah faces the daily challenges involved in waitressing. The Terminator stops by a gun store, where guns are on clearance. He looks at a brand new gun with a laser-assisted aiming device. The man tells him that there is a fifteen-day wait on handguns, but that he can take the rifles immediately. When the Terminator begins to load the gun, the man tells him, "You can't do that." The Terminator replies, "Wrong," and shoots the store owner.

As Reese walks through the streets with his own gun, the Terminator goes to a phone booth and also looks up the three listings for Sarah Connor. As he pulls up at the first address, he runs over a child's toy truck. A small dog barks at the Terminator as he heads to the door. He asks for Sarah Connor, and a woman says, "Yes?" He breaks open the door and kills her. At the restaurant, the other waitresses pull Sarah into the back so that she can see the news: a woman with her name has been murdered. Reese visits a junkyard and steals a car of his own. As he watches a machine working, he remembers the war to come in the future. He thinks of the leaders of the rebellion, who



try to defeat the machines. He also recalls a time when he is being shot at from every side as he and others run through the rubble of Los Angeles.

Back at their apartment, Sarah and her roommate, Ginger, dry their hair and hang out. Sarah picks up the phone, and a man tries to seduce her; it turns out to be Ginger's boyfriend, Matt. On the other side of town, the police try to figure out why two women by the name of Sarah Connor have been killed in one day. As Ginger and Sarah get ready to go out, they look for Pugsley, their iguana, and listen to their phone messages. It turns out that Sarah's date for the night called to cancel on her, so Sarah decides not to go out with Ginger. A bit later, Sarah leaves on her motorcycle, and we hear a car start behind her.

At the police station, reporters are trying to find out why women named Sarah Connor have been murdered in the same order as they are listed in the phone book. The police try to call Sarah, who doesn't hear the phone because she is taking a bath and listening to music. Later, in the restaurant, Sarah learns about the new killing from the television. She hurries to the phone book and realizes that she is the only Sarah Connor who has not been murdered yet. As Sarah walks to a bar to find a phone, she notices that Reese is following her. She tries to call the police, but the line is busy.

The Terminator breaks into the apartment and kills Matt. Because they are playing loud music, Ginger doesn't hear anything. Upon seeing her dead boyfriend, she begins screaming; the Terminator kills her as well. Just then, Sarah leaves a message on the apartment's answering machine, and the Terminator realizes he killed the wrong person. Sarah finally talks to the police, and they say they'll send someone to find her. At the same time, the Terminator arrives at the club and finds Sarah just as Sarah spots Reese at the bar. The Terminator pulls a gun on her, but Reese shoots the Terminator first. The Terminator falls to the floor, but recovers quickly. The two engage in a shootout in the club, and Sarah is saved by Reese. He reaches her and says, "Come with me if you want to live."

Outside, the Terminator gets back up and chases them. Reese shoots the Terminator a final time before speeding away. A cop calls the police to tell them that Reese has been involved in a hit-and-run. Reese checks on Sarah as they drive, but she is terrified of him. He tells her urgently that she must listen to him and that she can't do anything without his permission. She begs him not to hurt her. Reese explains that he is trying to protect her because she has been targeted for termination. He tells her that it's very important that she lives, but that the Terminator is a machine and is seemingly indestructible. He also informs her that both he and the Terminator are from the future.

Sarah tries to run away, but stops when Reese explains that the Terminator has no feelings and will not stop until she is dead. Reese admits that he's not even sure that he will be able to stop the Terminator. The Terminator finds their car, so Reese and Sarah run through the parking garage trying to locate a new one. Sarah finally asks Reese, "Why me? Why does it want me?" Reese explains that (in the future) there is a nuclear war. All of Los Angeles is gone, because after the war, the machines become smart enough to control everything. The human survivors are few and far between, but they



band together to fight the machines. The machines also keep some people alive so they can use them to build bodies. Reese explains that he grew up after the war, running from machines. One human man teaches all the survivors how to fight the machines; that man is Sarah's unborn son, John Connor.

The Terminator spots their car as they pull out, but they keep driving. The cars race through the streets, but the police finally catch Reese and Sarah. At the police station, Sarah tells the police what Reese told her. She also finds out that Ginger is dead. The Terminator returns to Sarah's apartment and repairs his damaged skin. Back at the station, the police believe that Reese is insane. Reese explains that in order to beat the humans, the machines must wipe out John Connor's entire existence by killing his mother before she has him. Reese also explains that the system he used to travel back to 1984 was destroyed, so it is impossible for either him or the Terminator to return to the future or for anyone else to join them in the past.

At the house, the Terminator cuts out his injured human eye. Inside, we see the real mechanical eye that actually controls his sight. The Terminator puts on sunglasses to hide his exposed robotic eye, retrieves his gun, and goes out to find Sarah. Reese explains that the Terminator was being typically systematic, trying to locate Sarah by using the phone book since he only knew her name and address. The police show Sarah Reese's video interview and tell her he's crazy. They tell her to get some rest and assure her that with thirty cops in the building, she will be safe. However, as the examiner walks out, the Terminator walks in. He claims to be Sarah's friend, but the policeman tells him that she's making a statement. Before walking out of the building, the Terminator states, "I'll be back." A moment later, he runs his car through the front of the building. The noise of the crash wakes Sarah, and the Terminator shoots everyone in sight as he tries to find her.

Reese breaks out of his room and attempts to locate Sarah. In his own search for Sarah, the Terminator kills most of the police force; however, Reese finds her first. They run away and hide under a bridge nearby. Sarah is cold, so Reese holds her. Sarah finally discovers that his first name is Kyle. He explains that going through time is kind of like being born. Kyle has been shot in the crossfire, and Sarah tries to fix his wound. Sarah asks about her son, and Kyle tells her that John is about his height with Sarah's eyes. He says, "He has a strength. I would die for John Connor." Kyle tells her that John doesn't say much about his father, who died before the war. Kyle says that he was not sent on this mission to the past, rather, he volunteered. He wanted to meet the legendary Sarah Connor, who taught her young son to fight, organize, and prepare while they were in hiding before the war. Sarah tells Kyle that she is neither tough nor organized, and that she doesn't want to be honored.

Kyle then delivers a message to Sarah from her son: "Thank you, Sarah, for your courage through the dark years. I can't help you with what you must soon face except to say that the future is not set. You must be stronger than you imagine you can be. You must survive, or I will never exist." Kyle compliments Sarah on her dressing of his wound, and she tells him that it's her first. He suggests that she get some sleep before daylight, but she asks him to tell her more about the future post-war world he came



from. He explains that humans must stay down by day and must still be careful at night, since the machines use infrared vision. We then see a scene from the future, with machines searching for the human survivors. We see John Connor looking at a photo of his mother, then some survivors trying to kill a Terminator before they are killed. The picture of Sarah catches fire and is destroyed. Back in the present, Kyle and Sarah are cuddled up sleeping when Sarah jumps awake and says that she has been dreaming about dogs. Reese explains that dogs are used to spot Terminators. The Terminator gets up and sets out on his search for Sarah. Kyle and Sarah find a motel and rent a room there. Kyle leaves a gun with Sarah and goes out to locate some supplies. At the motel, Sarah calls her mother but refuses to tell her where they are staying. She does, however, leave her the phone number. Unfortunately, Sarah is actually talking to the Terminator, who has assumed Sarah's mother's voice in order to trick Sarah; as a result, he now knows where they are staying.

Kyle teaches Sarah how to make bombs. As they sit together, Sarah asks whether the Terminator will find them, and Kyle says, "Probably." She replies, "It will never be over, will it? Look at me. I'm shaking. You must be pretty disappointed." He says, "No, I'm not." Then, Sarah asks about the women in his time and asks if there was someone special to him. He tells her that he never had anyone special, and she says, "I'm sorry."

Kyle tells her that John gave him a picture of her once, although he never understood why. He also tells her that he memorized everything about her face, and that he came across time for her: he loves her, and he always has. Embarrassed after his confession, Kyle walks away, but Sarah follows him and kisses him. They make love in the hotel as the Terminator is coming to find them. A dog begins barking outside, and we see that the Terminator is closing in on their location. However, Kyle has heard the dog's alert, and they are in the process of escaping by the time he arrives. The Terminator chases them on a motorcycle as they drive through the streets; he succeeds in shooting Kyle. The car flips, and the motorcycle skids down the street. The Terminator arises from the wrecked motorcycle, but is immediately run over by an eighteen-wheel truck. When the truck driver gets out, he falls prey to a surprise attack by the unharmed Terminator, who steals the truck. Sarah desperately tries to pull the injured Kyle from their car before the Terminator reaches them. Finally, they manage to get out and run away. Kyle uses some of the bombs they made to destroy the Terminator's truck. As Sarah looks back at the fire from the explosion, she sees the burning Terminator fall to the ground, consumed by flames. As she walks toward the truck, Kyle emerges from the smoke, and they embrace. However, in the background, the Terminator rises again. This time, he is a frightening, metallic, skeletal machine, stripped by the fire of his external human appearance.

Kyle and Sarah run into a factory building to hide from the Terminator; ironically, the industrial building contains a kind of assembly line with lots of robotic machinery. Kyle switches on some of the robots so that the Terminator will have trouble tracking the two of them, but then he collapses to the ground, overcome by his injuries. Sarah pulls him to his feet as the Terminator enters the room. The Terminator catches up to them, and Kyle forces Sarah to run as he tries to protect her. Kyle jams a bomb inside the Terminator, and the Terminator explodes, separating into several parts. However, one of



the Terminator's severed hands tries to attack Sarah. She frees herself and rushes over to Kyle to find that he was killed in the explosion. The partially-disabled Terminator again recovers and tries to reach Sarah one final time in a suspenseful chase scene. She escapes by electrocuting and crushing the Terminator with one of the giant machines in the factory. The police finally arrive at the building, and Sarah is taken to the hospital.

The film ends with Sarah talking into a small tape recorder as she drives through the desert:

"Tape 7. December 10. Where was I? What's most difficult for me is trying to decide what to tell you and what not to, but I guess I have a while yet before you're even able to understand these tapes. They're more for me at this point, just so I can get it straight."

As she drives, we see that Sarah is pregnant. As she pulls up to a gas station in the middle of the desert in Mexico, Sarah begins recording again:

"Should I tell you about your father? Boy, that's a tough one. Will it affect your decision to send him here, knowing that he is your father? If you don't send Kyle, you can never be. God, a person could go crazy thinking about this. I suppose I will tell you. I owe him that. Maybe it will help if you know that in the few hours that we had together, we loved a lifetime's worth."

As she finishes her sentence, a young boy snaps a photograph of her; he asks her to pay him for the picture. She pays him, and we see that it is the same photo that Kyle carried. The young boy runs off, saying, "There's a storm coming in." Sarah says, "I know," and drives away.





# Characters

## The Terminator, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger

### Description

Even if you have never seen the film, you probably know Arnold Schwarzenegger's character, the Terminator. The Terminator is a machine sent back from the future to kill John Connor's mother, Sarah, before John can be born. Although the Terminator looks like a human (albeit an extremely muscular one), he is actually constructed of metal and covered with human flesh and hair, which the machines harvest in order to create Terminators. Apparently, this nearly indestructible version of the Terminator is the most technologically advanced one yet.

The Terminator has but one goal: to kill Sarah Connor. The Terminator is programmed to achieve that goal through any means; he cannot stop until he succeeds. We also learn that the machine that sent the Terminator to the past was destroyed. Therefore, the Terminator is stuck in 1984; nothing can return him to his home in the post-apocalyptic future.

### Analysis

As a machine, the Terminator is a completely methodical being. He lacks any emotions whatsoever. He relies on simple, but relentless logic to achieve his clearly defined objective. The Terminator executes tasks systematically. For example, he uses the phone book to locate Sarah Connor. The machines know Sarah's name and that she lived in Los Angeles; they do not possess any other information about her. Therefore, in order to locate and terminate her, the Terminator looks up her name in the Los Angeles phone book and proceeds to kill each woman named Sarah Connor in the order in which they appear. The Terminator follows a similar pattern in order to obtain clothes and weapons. He identifies the first opportunities he encounters, then takes whatever he needs, using force if necessary.

Since the Terminator has no capacity for feelings, he understands little about the consequences of his actions. The Terminator kills many innocent people, whether young or old, in the process of trying to kill Sarah. He has no sense of responsibility for their deaths, nor does he have any concept of how their deaths will affect their families and other loved ones. He is simply a machine, and as a machine, the Terminator does not differentiate between good and evil; he simply does as he was programmed to do.



## **Kyle Reese, played by Michael Biehn**

### **Description**

Kyle Reese is a volunteer who travels from the future to protect Sarah Connor from the Terminator. Kyle is a loyal follower of Sarah's future son, John Connor, who is the powerful leader of a small resistance group of human survivors who are fighting to save their post-war world from the machines. Kyle is strong, handsome, brave, and seems to care deeply for both Sarah and John, which explains Sarah's growing feelings for him during their adventure.

Kyle is willing to do anything it takes to save Sarah, and therefore John, from the machines; however, Kyle also travels back in time in order to meet Sarah. Kyle has heard of her legendary actions from her son, John, whom she trained to lead the human survivors of the harsh post-war world; therefore, Kyle desperately wants to meet her. John once gave Kyle a photograph of Sarah that Kyle kept with him for years; during that time, Kyle began to fall in love with Sarah.

### **Analysis**

Kyle's loyalty to John and love for Sarah guide most of his actions throughout the film. Kyle is entirely willing to sacrifice his own life in order to save their lives; in fact, he seems aware that it will likely be necessary for him to do so. We discover that John never revealed Kyle would be his father; however, at some points during the film, Kyle acts as though he may have realized the truth. For instance, he mentions that John gave him Sarah's photograph, an action he says he never understood until now. Perhaps he has begun to realize that, in addition to saving John's life, he will also play an important role in John's birth.

Although he is a serious and determined person, Kyle is also kind and cautious. He watches over Sarah with great concern and is careful not to upset her more than necessary. Eventually, he clearly explains the specific details of their complicated and frightening situation; however, he doesn't tell her everything about the future until he feels that she is ready. He also waits to attack the Terminator until he is completely sure that he will target the right man. Since the new Terminators look exactly like humans and are more difficult to recognize, Kyle is conscious of his responsibility to protect innocent people. Through all these compassionate qualities, the human Kyle stands in stark contrast to the robotic Terminator.

## **Sarah Connor, played by Linda Hamilton**

### **Description**

Sarah Connor is a young, independent, single woman who lives a fairly fun and carefree life until Kyle and the Terminator come along. As a waitress at a restaurant, Sarah works



hard, then spends her free time hanging out with her roommate and going on dates. Sarah does not seem to worry or think much about the future, either immediate or distant.

When Sarah first meets both the Terminator and Kyle, she recognizes immediately that the Terminator poses a great threat, as he is obviously trying to shoot her. However, she is also unsure whether she can trust Kyle. His claims seem outrageous, and as a mature, intelligent woman, Sarah is not sure that believing him is a reasonable option. Although she tries to understand his story, she initially has trouble getting beyond the modern view that science should be able to explain everything, since science certainly cannot explain either Kyle or the Terminator.

## **Analysis**

Sarah is shocked when Kyle tells her what a brave, strong woman she will become in the future. Sarah perceives herself as a very normal person who is anything but courageous; however, Kyle assures her that she will evolve into quite an exceptional individual. Sarah's growth throughout the film represents her progress toward becoming an important person who will play a crucial and heroic role in the future of humanity.

Sarah falls in love with Kyle in the short time that they are together. The film suggests that Sarah conceives her son, the future human resistance leader John Connor, during the time she and Kyle spend together in 1984. Because of this, Sarah helps determine the fate of future generations; she also becomes their "mother figure." We learn that Sarah will nurture her child so that he can effectively fulfill his destiny. Although we only see the beginnings of the process in this film, Kyle's stories of the future help us fill in the blanks.

# Themes

## Power of Machines

At a time when technology and automation were becoming increasingly important, director James Cameron created a film capable of haunting audiences for years. It is generally well known that machines have increasingly taken over jobs that were formerly held by humans. As machines have become more complex and powerful and have been awarded greater responsibility in society, some fears have arisen that artificial intelligence may someday impact humankind in a negative way. Indeed, this theme lies at the core of many classic science fiction films (for example, Stanley Kubrick's *2001*).

*The Terminator* fictionalizes a possible future outcome of increased human reliance on machines. Although most people do not believe that the Earth could ever face the fate proposed in *The Terminator*, the film does warn people against becoming too confident in themselves and too dependent on machines.

## Free Will

*The Terminator* investigates the compelling question of whether people get to make choices about their lives or whether what happens to them is predetermined by some higher power, such as God, destiny, or karma. *The Terminator* seems to make a statement that we each make our own choices, and that our collective choices determine the future. Rather than portraying history as a predetermined course of events, the film seems to show that history can be redefined. Both the machines and the human resistance group members believe this is the case; otherwise, the Terminator and Kyle would not have been sent back on their missions to 1984.

Accordingly, many viewers believe *The Terminator* suggests that we all act upon free will. At the same time, there are others who believe that the film (especially when coupled with its sequels) really makes quite an opposite statement: that all of our actions are predetermined. We cannot and do not actually alter history, but merely act out the events of our destiny.

## Faith

An underlying theme of *The Terminator* is faith, especially faith in humankind. When Kyle first introduces himself to Sarah, he asks her to trust him. Sarah must rely on simple faith to believe that he is telling the truth and that he wants to protect her. Although she does not believe him right away, she does learn to trust him.

Additionally, despite great odds, the human survivors of the future, post-apocalyptic world retain faith in the final triumph of mankind against the machines. Rather than

renounce hope when the Terminator is sent back to 1984 to kill Sarah, the people of the future respond by sending Kyle to protect her. This evidences their great faith that humans are capable of conquering machines in the present, past, and future.

## Style and Cinematography

*The Terminator* is a low-budget film with great special effects that were especially exciting for their time. The Terminator himself is made to look real using computer technology. When the film was made, the effects using the Terminator's metal body were some of the most advanced to date. The Terminator is a believable, animated, robotic being even when his hand is detached from his body. Additionally, *The Terminator* won awards for makeup. The Terminator's, Kyle's, and Sarah's makeup is realistic and plausible, even when attempting to show injuries.

One of the most impressive aspects of *The Terminator* is that the future scenes actually look as though they could be real; they are extremely easy for contemporary audiences to relate to. Importantly, neither humans nor machines are so futuristic as to be implausible. The Los Angeles setting realistically looks like a real city that has been reduced to rubble. The realism of these scenes helps to feed the viewer's fear that its events could actually take place. Although there are some flying machines shown shooting at the humans, even these are comparable to planes that the military was using and creating when the film was made. The scenes filmed in the future are also very dark. As Kyle explains, humans can only move at night; this illusion is never destroyed by the use of daytime scenes.

The chase scenes in *The Terminator* are also good, suspenseful, and plentiful. Using regular workaday cars and guns, Kyle and Sarah flee the Terminator time and again. The realism is heightened because no weapons or vehicles are brought back from the future. Kyle and Sarah generally run at night, under the cover of darkness, just as the people of the future do. The Terminator, however, has night vision; we are able to see through his eyes at the hotel and when he first reaches the present. By allowing us to look through the Terminator's eyes, the filmmakers help us to feel even more distanced from him; we become aware that he can see at night and that he receives all his information from what looks like a computer screen in his mind. These effects also make him seem relentless and invincible, again increasing suspense.

# Motifs

## Creator Versus Creation

In the world of *The Terminator*, humans have created machines only to have the machines turn against humans. If this somehow reminds you of Frankenstein and his monster, then you are on the right track. The battle of a creator versus his or her creation is a longstanding motif that harkens back to Biblical writings. How and why does a creation begin to oppose its creator? Can the creator survive?

Such concerns lie at the heart of *The Terminator*. However, rather than talking about God and his people or Frankenstein and his monster, *The Terminator* suggests a battle to which people in contemporary times can quite easily relate: man versus machine. Playing on both traditional philosophical and religious preoccupations of the past and newer technology-inspired fears about the future, *The Terminator* seeks to address the question of whether machines might someday take over Earth and destroy humanity.

## Time Travel

Time travel is a common storytelling device. In order for the story of *The Terminator* to have powerful impact and convey a sense of great consequence, it must be rooted in a concrete past and moving toward a specific future. Accordingly, in the film, we see both the past, present, and future; significantly, the past and the present are one and the same for the viewer. In short, time travel provides a frame of reference through which the viewer can understand, contextualize, and evaluate the significance of each singular event in the film.

Since both the Terminator and Kyle have traveled to the past/present (1984) from the future, we are able to see quite concretely that the future is largely determined by the past. That is, future events, objects, places, and people are directly affected by things that happen in the past/present that we see on the screen.

## Fear of the Unknown

*The Terminator* exploits the typical human fear of the unknown. When the film was made, the world of computers and other machines constituted a relatively unknown domain for many individuals. Some people neither trusted nor wanted to use computers or robots for fear that they would hurt the economy, or, even worse, hurt people. The film effectively leverages this fear by creating a machine-dominated post-war world that seems shocking, yet plausible to the audience. Many of the film's viewers may have been able to imagine that, at some point in time, the film's events might actually be possible, a factor that helped generate great interest in the film.



Fearing the unknown is part of being human, but is also one characteristic that separates the robotic Terminator from humanity. Rather than fearing the unknown world of the past, the Terminator is focused only on his goal of killing Sarah. He is afraid of nothing, not only because he is stronger than everyone he meets, but also because he has no emotions and cannot even grasp the concept of fear. Indeed, he is unaware that such a force even exists.



# Symbols

## Sarah's Photograph

When Kyle tells Sarah his story, we see a future scene in which his photo of Sarah catches fire. He tells her that John, her son, gave him the photograph, although Kyle never understood why he did so. However, we quickly begin to suspect the truth about John's paternity; it seems that Kyle fathered him during his trip back to 1984. John describes Sarah's appearance in the photograph as being somehow sad. In the last scene of the movie, we see a little boy take the same photograph of Sarah. She tucks it away to give to her unborn son at a later date, along with the tapes she is recording for him.

Sarah's photograph instigates Kyle's love for her while at the same time causing John to lose his father forever. The photograph symbolizes the complex relational cycle in which the characters find themselves. Although John may not want to send his father back to protect Sarah, he knows that he has no choice; otherwise, he will not exist to lead the human revolution.

## Phone Book

The phone book is symbolic of the simple logic employed by the Terminator to attain his programmed goals. He systematically goes through the phone book in order to find Sarah Connor and kill her. Although Kyle also references the phone book, he is obviously more certain of where and for whom he should be looking. Finally, Sarah checks the phone book to confirm that she is in imminent danger: she is next in the list of women named Sarah Connor. Her ability to use the more sophisticated logic of a human allows her to realize the degree of the threat facing her and begin seeking help.

## Machines

Throughout the film, shots of even the most normal of machines remind viewers of the fate of the future. When we first see the Terminator appear, he shows up directly next to a large bulldozer. This bulldozer reminds us of the previous scene from the future, in which bulldozers chase down humans survivors hiding in the rubble of Los Angeles. Wherever machines pop up, the dire, dark future ruled by machines returns to the mind of the viewer. In this way, the director keeps the suspense, fear, and sense of urgency mounting consistently throughout the film. Ironically, Sarah finally turns the tables in the end, using industrial machinery to crush and electrocute the Terminator. Perhaps this can be seen as a sign of hope that humanity will someday be able to reclaim their world from the machines.

## Terminator's Hand

In one of the film's final scenes in the warehouse, Sarah is attacked by the Terminator's hand even after it is detached from his body. The Terminator's hand represents the unstoppable nature of the Terminator; however, Sarah uses the machinery in the warehouse to finally terminate him, at least for the time being. When the hand finally stops moving, Sarah knows she is safe from the threat of the Terminator.



## Essay Questions

What has happened in the years between the present (1984) and beginning (future) scenes of the film?

How do humans live in the future?

How does the film seek to answer the question, "What if machines began to act independently, like humans"?

What is Kyle Reese's role in both the present and the future?

Who is John Connor, and why is he important to both machines and humans in the future?

What does the film say about choice versus predestination?

What does the Terminator mean when he says, "I'll be back"?

Why doesn't Kyle bring weapons from the future?

What do we learn from Sarah's tapes at the end of the film?

Will the future remain unchanged, or will it be altered by the events of the film?

### **Bibliography**

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088247/>

[www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org)