

Death versus the Tedium of Immortality: Analyzing the Theme of Human Mortality in two films of Woody Allen with Special Reference to two Vampire Films

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Abstract: Death and the meaninglessness of life are two recurring themes in the films of Woody Allen. This paper will focus on two films of Woody Allen and two vampire films in relation with Bernard Williams's own arguments regarding immortality in his essay *The Makrapulous Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality*. While on the surface these films seem too different, yet they have a strong thematic connection which this paper will bring out. The vampire films analyzed here prove that the vampire characters can be used to dramatize interesting philosophical ideas beyond being mere sources of entertainment.

Keywords: death, Woody Allen, vampire, boredom, existentialist, film

Death, the absence of God and the meaninglessness of life are recurring themes in the films of Woody Allen. In films like *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Whatever Works*, Allen's protagonists are often seen struggling with the fact that they shall one day die and this in turn leads to their isolation from others around them and a severe reduction in their ability to find happiness and contentment. In contrast, the vampire characters in *Interview with the Vampire* and *Only Lovers Left Alive* are representations of what an immortal life could potentially be like. The title of the paper is partly derived from philosopher Bernard Williams's essay *The Makrapulous Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality* where he argues against a life of immortality. These films analyzed here can be seen as dramatizing the essential points in Williams's essay.

Williams argues that "Immortality or a state without death, would be meaningless", that in "a sense, death gives the meaning to life", and he cites the story of Elina Makrapoulous who by virtue of a magical elixir is enabled to prolong her life but unfortunately as she goes on living for more than three hundred years, she enters "a state of boredom, indifference and coldness" (118-19). Similarly, the characters Louis and Adam in the films *Interview with the Vampire* and *Only Lovers Left Alive*, respectively, are portrayed as being bereft of any zest for life. Williams writes that "Some ascetics have supposed that happiness required reducing one's desires to those necessary for one's existence, that is, to those that one has to have granted that one exists at all; rather, it requires that some of one's desires should be fully categorical, and one's existence itself wanted as something necessary to them" (121). The implication here is that categorical desires are not only distinct from our basic instinctual ones like the need for food or shelter but that their fulfillment is dependent on our being alive in the first place. One's ambition to travel the entire world or write a great novel or build a business empire and so on constitutes a categorical desire. One does not usually live one's life without any ambitions outside a state of mere survival and there has to be some goal which drives one forward. Williams further argues:

Suppose, then, that categorical desire does sustain the desire to live. So long as it remains so, I shall want not to die. Yet I also know, if what has gone before is right, that an eternal life would be unliveable. In part, as EM's case originally suggested, that is because categorical desire will go away from it: in those versions, such as hers, in which I am recognisably myself, I would eventually have had altogether too much of myself. There are good reasons, surely, for

dying before that happens. But equally, at times earlier than that moment, there is reason for not dying. Necessarily, it tends to be either too early or too late (132).

Elina's boredom arises because there are only a limited number of categorical desires which she can fulfill without changing her core self. In other words, there is a problem with immortality when the self is a constant entity throughout the hundreds of years that Elina has lived. There is only so many ambitions and goals that one particular self or identity can have within so large a span of time. In *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Adam and Eve have lived for centuries and at present, Adam is tired of life and he ensures that a special bullet be made so as to have an option of ridding himself of this affliction. The film suggests that Adam was not always this morose as evidenced by the following present day conversation between Eve and Christopher Marlowe who is also depicted as being a vampire:

Marlowe: ...Anyways, give my regards to that suicidally romantic scoundrel.

Eve: Do you really think he is?

Marlowe: Scoundrel?

Eve: Well...Let's hope he's just romantic. Even so, I mainly blame Shelley and Byron and some of those French arseholes he used to hang around with.

Marlowe: Oh, I wish that I met him before I wrote Hamlet. He would have provided the most perfect role model imaginable. (00:36:36-00:36:15)

It must have been an exciting and probably adventurous life that Adam has lived before and he could have been an inspiring and heroic figure as Marlowe implies. Although Adam himself is a musician, he doesn't show any desire for fame or applause from the human world. It seems that any categorical desire that Adam must have had has either been fulfilled or withered away leaving him with nothing but a void which he struggles to fill. When confronted by Eve after she finds his gun and special bullet, Adam complains, "It's the zombies I'm sick of. And their fear of their own fucking imaginations" (00:59:21-00:59:28). Ironically, it is Adam who is living like a zombie while the humans that he seems to despise are busy going about their daily affairs and not complaining of a lack of activities with which to occupy themselves. Hence, from Williams's perspective it appears that Adam should have killed himself way before his present affliction has completely taken hold of his spirit. There is a scene in *Interview with the Vampire* where Louis says, "That morning I was not yet a vampire and I saw my last sunrise. I remember it completely and yet I can't recall any sunrise before it. I watched the whole magnificence of the dawn for the last time as if it were the first. And then I said farewell to sunlight and set out to become what I became" (00:10:51-00:10:24). In a way, Louis's human self is about to die and this fact accentuates his appreciation of the last sunrise he witnesses, an event which prior to this moment, Louis had adapted to seeing its constant recurrence, has lost any significance. Here, Louis is completely involved in the moment because he knows that his present self is about to die and his life as a vampire would be completely different.

In addition to the theme of boredom, *Interview with the Vampire* also deals with the existential concern regarding the meaninglessness of life. An important dialogue takes place between Louis and Lestat the vampire responsible for turning Louis into one:

Louis: You came from Paris?

Lestat: As did the one who made me.

Louis: Tell me about him. You must have learned something from him.

Lestat: I learned absolutely nothing...

Louis: But you must know something about the meaning of it all?

Lestat: Why? Why should I know these things? Do you know them? (00:25:31-00:25:56):

Lestat is angered and annoyed by Louis's questions. Louis had hoped that as his maker and someone who has lived and seen more than him, Lestat would be able to help him discover the answer to this important question. Louis is tired of simply slaking his thirst and mingling amongst the higher classes of society in soirees. Later on he abandons Lestat in favour of the latter's own maker Armand with the hope that he would learn from Armand what he could not from Lestat. Armand and Lestat are not gods and they fail to satisfy Louis's intellectual curiosity. If Louis had any faith in a god then he could at least seek consolation in the idea that there is someone who could give him the answers he seeks. Animals do not seem bothered by such existential concerns and unfortunately for Louis he does not function like one even though he is not human. The film as such embodies a Sartrean view of life. Jean Paul Sartre in his essay *Existentialism and Humanism*, explains that his man is without any fixed nature, values and commands which will dictate his life as there is no God to give him one (29). Louis's vampiric existence is also bereft of any ultimate goal just like that of a human's. Lestat made him simply because he wanted a companion while passing through

eternity with no other grand design in mind. But Louis is also not destined to be Lestat's slave and he freely chooses to break his bonds with Lestat and go his own way. Further, any novelty that a vampire's life had at the start has worn off after centuries of existence and though Louis is still a free being, he has no other categorical desires left. An undying being without purpose will as a result enter a perpetual state of boredom like Louis does in this film.

Although *Hannah and Her Sisters* is a romantic drama, Allen also weaves in the themes of human mortality and meaningless in the universe. This existentialist dimension of the film is portrayed through the character of Mickey Sachs who happens to be a television producer plagued by the thought of death. The following dialogue ensues between him and his assistant:

Assistant: What do you mean you're quitting? Why? The news is good. You don't have can... the thing.

Mickey: Do you realize what a thread were all hanging by?

Assistant: Mickey you're off the hook. You should be celebrating.

Mickey: Do you understand how meaningless everything is? Everything I'm talking about. Our lives, the show, the whole world. It's meaningless.

Assistant: Yeah but you're not dying.

Mickey: No I'm not dying now. But ... You know when I ran out of the hospital, I...I was so thrilled cos they told me I was going to be alright. I'm running down the street, suddenly I stop. Cos it hits me alright... You know...I'm not gonna go today, I'm not gonna go tomorrow but eventually I'm gonna be in that position.

Assistant: Your'e just realizing this now?

Mickey: I don't realize it now. I know it all the time. But I manage to stick it in the back of my mind and because it's a very horrible thing to think about...

Assistant: Eventually that is going to happen to all of us.

Mickey: Yes. But doesn't that ruin everything for you? That makes everything you know...It just takes the pleasure out of everything. (00:49:30-00:49:47)

Mickey's atheism does not allow him find refuge in any religion from his present anxieties even though he tries his best to develop a faith in a god. Unlike the case of a vampire where there is no shortage of time, the fact is that death is not just the end of everything for a human like Mickey, but is also an impediment in his quest to fulfill his categorical desires in the first place. Mickey is right in that after he dies all his work and accomplishments would not matter to him since he would not be there to look back in appreciation and pride. The value and meaning that Mickey finds in his work will matter only to him and will also die with him. There is no overarching purpose or god given goal that will make his life meaningful for eternity. But at the same time there is no danger of Mickey's life becoming a tedious affair. Although Mickey's fear of death at first causes him to lose his enthusiasm for life, he also regains an even bigger appreciation for his finite existence because of it. It is when he is sitting in a movie theater and watching a comedy that he has previously watched many times before that he has this turnaround:

...I started getting hooked on the film you know. And I started to feel... How can you even think of killing yourself. I mean isn't it stupid? I mean look at all the people up there on the screen. You know they're real funny and what if the worst is true. What if there is no God and you only go around once and that's it. You know? Don't you want to be part of the experience? You know... It's not all a drag. And I'm thinking to myself I should stop ruining my life and stop searching for answers I'm never gonna get and just enjoy it while it lasts. (01:38:00-01:38:42)

Unlike the vampires mentioned before, Mickey's senses are not numbed by the experience of endless time thereby ensuring that his life is not a complete drag. So far, in real life there is no example by which we can ascertain for sure that a real human living for eternity would constantly be able to find new objectives to fulfill and new ways of passing the time if he or she maintains her original self. One's values and beliefs changes over times and hence one's identity is also not a fixed entity. Even one's memory is not permanent meaning that we often fail to fully comprehend the changes that one's self has undergone. In this day and age one could potentially record in an audio-visual format each and every activity in one's life from infancy

to adulthood thereby supplementing one's fallible memory. Yet there is no guarantee that by going through these records to remember who one was will somehow help in maintaining a fixed self. Part of the problem for the vampires is that they seem to have stopped changing their selves. *An interview with the Vampire* opens with Louis narrating his life story starting with the year 1791 to a human in the late twentieth century. He remembers vividly all the major events of his life, all the pain and loss he has had to endure. Similarly, Adam in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, cannot appreciate modern life amongst humans because he is too tied up to the past. Though he lives in the twenty first century, his house is not a modern one. Adam uses an old phone, an old television set and collects vintage guitars among other things. Memory is the nemesis for these immortals and if a large part of it is erased then a new self would be born and new desires or the old desires will seem like new ones. Adam and Louis can commit suicides and solve their problems or else a major part of their present selves will have to die in order to rejuvenate their lives.

The title of Allen's film *Whatever Works* suggests just that, that one must do what one can to find happiness even though life is meaningless and death awaits all. Boris Yelnikov a retired physicist, divorcee, atheist, misanthrope and hypochondriac has a habit of waking up in the middle of the night panicking due to his anxiety regarding death. His antidote comes in the form of a young girl named Melody whose naivete and youthful optimism at first annoys Boris but eventually despite himself ends up liking and even marrying her. In one scene Boris tries to rationalize his actions: "What possessed me? The search in life for something to give the illusion of meaning. To quell a panic. Alright, so it's been a year. Three hundred and sixty five days of married life and you know what? Not the worst year in my life either" (00:39:38-00:39:56). The key here is that if Melody's temperament is not different from that of Boris's their relationship would never even begin in the first place. If Melody and Boris have far too similar personas and attitudes then they would have been in a perpetual state of gloom till the end of their lives. Although in the story Melody leaves Boris for a younger man, the latter again meets a woman named Helena who is also the opposite of Boris and they too begin a new relationship. Outside of these relationships, Boris never displays any care for others or a hint of joy and appreciation for life. Relationships are one of the key ways by which one can find meaning and value in life even though these might only matter to the people involved in them. Unfortunately for the vampires, they seem to either be unable to find meaning and purpose even in their relationships or the people who matter most to them are taken away. In *Interview with the Vampire*, after the death of his wife and child Louis finds a new desire in nurturing an orphan named Claudia whom he also turned into a vampire. Claudia becomes the centre of his focus and attention for decades until she meets her end at the hands of another group of vampires. Prior to her death both Claudia and Louis have broken their ties with Lestat, conspired against and even tried to murder him. Although Adam and Eve are lovers they live far apart from each other in different countries. It is not that Adam has stop caring for Eve as evidenced by his snatching away the gun when Eve pretended to shoot herself. Eve still matters to him even though their relation is no longer a source of pleasure for either. Towards the end of *Only Lovers Left Alive* there is a scene where the vampire couple's situation is contrasted with that of a pair of young human lovers. The vampires with their tired faces look on as the young lovers embrace and dance slowly under the night sky and after a few moments go up to the humans to turn them (01:54:06-01:54:24). Turning the humans implies that Adam and Eve have both decided that forming new relationships is the antidote to their problems and one gets the sense that Adam and Eve will have to repeat this act again and again until even this becomes tiresome.

While Allen's films are usually not studied with reference to vampire films or vice versa, the films analyzed here have a strong thematic connection especially when viewed in relation with Bernard Williams's own arguments on the subject of immortality. Although true immortality is not within our grasp, these films can be viewed as thought experiments regarding what an eternal life could possibly be like especially one that takes place in a Godless and meaningless universe. Lastly, the two vampire films discussed are unconventional in that they function not as fantasy stories intended to shock or horrify the audience but instead they prove that the vampire character can be seen as vessel for important philosophical ideas as well.

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