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Playing with Death in *Harold and Maude*

For the 1971 film *Harold and Maude*, directed by Hal Ashby and written by Colin Higgins, the theme of death nearly shadows the entire story. Following a young Harold Chasen, disillusioned and soulless living with his wealthy socialite mother, his days at home consist of a series of seemingly endless grotesque fake suicide attempts, all in an effort to gain the attention he so much desires from his mother. We see him wearing dark, colorless clothing, and he drives around a hearse and visits funeral after funeral. His intrigue or fascination with death is apparent, and for the first twenty minutes all we see is attempt after attempt. From hanging himself from the ceiling in the first scene of the film, to floating motionless in the pool behind his home, his mother seems to have grown accustomed to Harold's antics and deliberately ignores them in the hopes that his morbid curiosity will subside. It's only when he stages a grizzly scene in the bathroom, with blood smeared all over the walls, that his mother grows tired of Harold and his behavior and wants it to end. She cries, "I can't take much more of this, I can't take anymore," (6:59-7:29). Ms. Chasen sends Harold to a psychiatrist in the hope that he can get to the bottom of why Harold does what he does.

Taking Harold's actions under the analysis of Sigmund Freud, as he writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "...the artistic imitation carried out by adults, which, unlike children's, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences and can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable," (17). For Freud, it seems to him

that people tend to seek such a force majeure, even if it is sometimes something that might even be deadly or dangerous, almost for the thrill or the enjoyment of it. It seems that for Harold, these fake suicide attempts might be the only excitement he has in his life, which goes together well with what Freud speaks of in his work. He is trapped in this repeating cycle, where even with his mother arranging dates for him, and her asking for his uncle's help to enlist him in the army, nothing of what she does seems to make any impact whatsoever. The communication between mother and son in this case has been irreparably shattered. He defies everything she tries to do with more of these attempts, both around the house with her as well as comically in the middle of his arranged dates, one of which being that he pretends to light himself on fire (28:57-30:30). At the end of that scene he even grins towards the camera, breaking the fourth wall for the audience, signifying to them the enjoyment he gets out of messing with his mother's plans for his life.

Ironically, in a way he even does all of these elaborate stunts to get the attention of his mother, which as we learn later into the film, he believes that she does not truly express any genuine emotion towards him. Speaking to Maude at the end of an eventful day, he details his first brush with death, one while he was still attending boarding school. An explosion in a chemistry lab caused by him, leading first responders in the aftermath to believe that he was killed in the accident. What had really happened was that he fled the scene to avoid getting in trouble, and made his way home without his mother noticing. When the police arrive at the Chasen household to deliver the news of her son's supposed death, she exaggerates her reaction, all while Harold watches from upstairs. This realization of his mothers' lack of love for him is devastating. Maude replies with something very poignant, where even though Harold says he enjoys being dead, she says "A lot of people enjoy being dead. But they are not dead, really.

They're just backing away from life... Play as well as you can. Go, team, go... live! Otherwise, you got nothing to talk about in the locker room,” (57:28-58:01). Here she says that not living life wholly and fully leaves you very empty and without experiences you can share with others. What she teaches him throughout their time together is how to live life fully, taking consideration for the short time we all have on earth.

Throughout *Harold and Maude* we see Maude carry around a huge set of keys for many different makes of car, borrowing whatever automobile she finds. She poses nude for a sculptor, unashamed of her age and her body. She steals a tree from a city street and plants it in the forest. While what she does could be seen by many to be either obscene, reckless, illegal, or nonsensical, she is of the belief that such possessions in life are mere frivolous things, and to be in fear of your body is to be in fear of yourself. Harold even gives her a ring that says “Harold loves Maude,” which she loves, and immediately throws it into a body of water, so she “always knows where it is,” (1:18:15-1:19:10). Harold has this look of amazement in his eyes, unable to believe that she would throw something so meaningful to him, while still fully embracing the act of love.

To him, Maude is so completely free, free of holding onto the past, onto possessions, and onto anything that holds her back from living her life. Maude teaches Harold to never be ashamed of himself, and even to allow himself to be ridiculous no matter what anyone says. She says when they sit together in a field next to a tree, “Everyone has the right to make an ass out of themselves. You just can't let the world judge you too much,” (1:07:25-1:07:35). Later on she even engages in intercourse with Harold, and they even decide to get married. Harold is very excited to make such a commitment with Maude, much to the chagrin of his mother, his uncle, his therapist, and his priest. With this newfound freedom he has learned from Maude, Harold

does not care for the opinions of others who wish to encroach on his happiness. By this point he has truly escaped the psychological prison he was stuck in. No longer is he playing dead, he is truly alive. The final scene in the film where he pushes his precious hearse over a cliff shows his ultimate transformation from being obsessed with death to that of love and life, he even wears colorful clothing on his own for the first time, and plays music from the banjo that Maude gave to him (1:27:32-1:31:00). No longer is he symbolized by death, or tied down to it's despair and sadness.

While Maude's decision to end her life just as she turns eighty comes off as a surprise to Harold, the audience could have picked up on a bit of foreshadowing earlier in the film. During the second funeral both Harold and Maude visit together, inside the church, she tries to get his attention as the casket of the deceased man is about to go outside to the hearse. She offers him liquorice and then asks if Harold knew the dead man. He replies no and she says, "I heard he was eighty years old, I'll be eighty next week. Good time to move on, don't you think?" (16:45-16:54). With that quote, we know that her idea of life ending at eighty is appealing to her. Taking that into account along with Harold's discovery later that she has numbers tattooed on her arm (signifying that she was a survivor of the Holocaust, as she also said she lived in Vienna), it is safe to assume that with her having survived such a horrific experience, being someone who at one point in her life had her agency forcefully taken away from her, living in fear of death at any possible moment, she believes that having complete agency of her life and how she lives it is the only way for her to truly experience life to the fullest. Living too old only gets someone into a prison of the body, a prison of age. One where the rapid deterioration of the body prohibits one's ability to live life however they want. She talks about society earlier in the film, how "Zoos are full, prisons are overflowing. Oh, how the world still dearly loves a cage," (26:35-26:55). She

completely exists outside of this supposed cage of life, driving whatever car she wants, living in whatever train car she wants, doing whatever gives her pleasure in life, to be “as free as a bird.” She is so free in fact that she even wants to be able to choose when she ends it. Her agency is truly hers, and no one else's, not even Harold. She once had that freedom stolen from her, and now that she lives on and plays by her own rules, no one will ever take it from her again. Not in life or death.

She could have very well lived longer to stay with Harold for more, but she stays true to her belief that she should pass on at eighty, teaching him that nothing in life exists forever, and that every moment you do enjoy something should be cherished and not taken for granted. He cries during that fateful ambulance ride towards Maude's death, to which she replies after he expresses his love for her that he should, “...go and love some more,” (1:25:41-1:25:52). While I personally wouldn't do the same as Maude, I can't help but be impressed at her willingness to die as much as to live. I think for her she did the right thing with her life, as she proved that what she does is only up to her. Personally, one has to respect another's wishes. She lived a full and happy life, she has done all of what she ever wanted. From her perspective, why would she want to age into immobility and sadness. It is better to die happy than to die sad and She definitely could have stayed with Harold, but as we see at the end of the film, this final lesson she teaches him is that everything we live around, be it people or things, will die someday. For us who continue to live, it is important to keep living to the fullest, no matter what. Only time knows when our journey will come to an end. Since our death is kept in mystery, there should never be a moment wasted. Any one of us could go tomorrow.