

Sarah Lewis

Professor Stephanie Dowdle Maenhardt

English 2600

22 July, 2013

“Death Knocks”: An Analysis of the Dramatic Arts

In the dramatic arts, plays are considered sources of amusement that have the ability to transport audiences into the world of the characters within the play. Many times, audiences are able to take away deep and inspirational ideas conveyed through the characters within the play’s storyline. Audiences are also enabled to peek into the roots of a play to find and interpret various aspects of the dramatic arts. This can be seen within Woody Allen’s, “Death Knocks”. Elizabeth A. Howe’s text, “Close Reading: An Introduction to Literature” (2010) will also be used to investigate several aspects of the genre of drama including plot, characterization, and theme by using a formalist critique to analyze a play.

In the world of cinema, Woody Allen is one of the most remarkable, funny enigmas in cinema (Woody Allen Biography, 2013). He’s known as “New York's most famous neurotic whose hallmark is the self-deprecating humour of his films from Annie Hall to Manhattan” (Woody Allen Biography, 2013). He began his line of work at fifteen years of age writing gags for television news stations (Woody Allen Biography, 2013). While he has encountered several dramatic obstacles in his personal life, “he wrote gags for big time entertainers Bob Hope and Sid Caesar before becoming a standup on the 1960s comedy circuit, where he would fumble with

his glasses, gulp in faux-terror and deliver devastating one-liners with a boxer's timing” (Woody Allen Biography, 2013). One of Allen’s most remembered plays today is “Death Knocks” a story included in “Getting Even”, an anthology of short stories and plays that was originally published in *The New Yorker* between the mid nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies.

In the comedic play “Death Knocks”, a man named Nat Ackerman attempts to evade leaving with Death by challenging him to a surprising duel. Set in his house in Queens, New York, Nat confronts a black clothed and hooded clumsy intruder known as Death and challenges him to a game of gin rummy in an exchange for an extra twenty-four hours of his life. In winning the game, Nat is allowed to escape his fate for the duration of an extra few hours.

In any play or film, the plot of a play often involves the element of conflict “between two or more characters concerning issues such as love, power, money, moral codes, human rights, war and peace” (Howe 138). As the plot moves forward, the audience invests in learning how the characters will resolve the conflicts that they face (Howe 138). For example, in “Death Knocks” Allen uses a humorous approach to the dramatic tension that is built between the characters, Nat and Death, as they engage in the game that will decide Nat’s fate. At the beginning of the play, viewers can see how Allen displays the awkward humor during the formalities in the introductions between Nat and Death. As the story progresses, the audience can see how the conflict is displayed through Allen’s use of alternating playful and serious tones as evidenced by the amicable banter between the two characters during their game of gin rummy. For example, while Nat and Death play a hand of gin rummy, a more serious tone emerges as Nat takes a few appropriate moments to stop and inquire about what would result if he was to go with Death in the end (Death Knocks, Canvas). Towards the end of the play, the audience can also identify

Allen's use of dramatic irony as Nat becomes the character who, along with the audience, can see and understand the bigger picture of the events occurring in the current predicament more so than Death. In understanding the workings of the plot, viewers are able to follow the story with better ease through guidance from the characters within the play.

In any play or film, the plot tends to depend on the character's personalities in order to be understood by viewers (Howe 138). The audience typically gets to know characters through their actions and what they say as well as through what others say about them (Howe 135). For example, Nat is described as a fifty-seven year old man who lives in a fancy home and begins to prepare for bed by reading a newspaper when he becomes interrupted by something unexpected. This is something that the audience can identify with. Death in turn is described as a "somber, caped figure" (whose appearance looks similar to Nat) tries to climb through Nat's window in order to collect him; however it is apparent that Death encounters several difficulties climbing into Nat's window which results in requesting some hospitality from Nat for his efforts (Death Knocks, Canvas). By portraying these two characters in this respect, Allen enables viewers the chance to identify with both characters. By presenting both of these characters this way, it helps to understand them in their role and purpose within the plot of the play. In learning about the characters, the audience is also able to identify whether or not the writer has used a stereotype to portray one or more characters.

Stereotypes are often one dimensional and "are most commonly found in comedies where the playwright often aims to make fun of a particular human trait or failing" (Howe 136). During his play, Allen nods to a few stereotypes that many people have about *the other side* through Nat while participating in the formalities with Death. For example, after Nat tells Death that he is not

what he expected and Death sarcastically states “I’m sorry, I disappointed you” (Death Knocks, Canvas). In the content of his dialogue, Death is given a witty and relatable personality that is similar a human’s which allows Nat the ability to view Death as an equal. This makes it is easier for Nat to negotiate a way out of going with Death and gaining an extra twenty-four hours by playing a round of gin rummy. This also allows Nat to have the courage to ask Death the basic question(s) about what it’s like on “the other-side” and what will happen once Nat goes there and how it will happen (Death Knocks, Canvas). This insight about the characters gives the audience the ability to further understand the theme behind the play by using a formalist critique.

Many times a writer may dare to bring a new perspective to a sensitive topic or theme. If one desired to further analyze the said writer’s method of addressing a sensitive topic such as death and dying, they may use a formalist critique. Formalist critics tend to “concentrate their attention on the work itself and specifically on its literariness---the intrinsically literary qualities that make it a work of art” (Howe, 190). In the dramatic arts, the theme is known as “the motivation for the author’s choice of certain kinds of character and events and for the presence of certain significant details” (Howe 140). In his play, viewers can see how Allen’s choice in characters and the content within their conversation allows the theme of this play to represent how most people do what they can to avoid death. Allen also uses the act of a character playing a game of gin rummy with Death to symbolize how people may try to negotiate or do everything they can to live. Although many people may feel uncomfortable when discussing death, Allen approaches this topic at a new perspective. For example, he alters his reader’s view about death (something that no one can control) by using the character Nat to show the ability for others to *cheat* Death fair and square through a game of gin rummy. Allen also addresses this topic in a humorous and light manner by casting the role of death itself into his play and gives Death a

relatable personality that audiences can relate to. In this way, Nat has the ability to be portrayed as superior to Death once Nat is able to turn the tables and get the upper hand during the game. This portrayal of Death allows the audience to believe how Death can easily *give in* to Nat's negotiation after Nat wins the game which results in allowing Nat to live for an extra twenty-four hours. Thus, by having Death enter with the upper hand and exiting with the lower hand, Allen illustrates the importance of taking the time to embrace the humorous perspectives in life rather than focusing all energy on the drama.

When most people attend a play, they may become transported in the world of the character in a suspension of disbelief. After becoming lost in the storyline of the plot, they may reflect on the aspects within the writing of the play that gives the story this powerful ability. In doing so, viewers may discover the reason behind a playwright's work of art. This is presently seen within Woody Allen's play, "Death Knocks". With the use of Elizabeth A. Howe's text, "Close Reading: An Introduction to Literature" (2010), these ideas can be further investigated and brought into light. In understanding the magic within the script, viewers will receive a better understanding of various aspects of drama as well as appreciate the works of art from the world's most enigmatic writer in the world of cinema.

Works Cited

Allen, Woody. *Death Knocks*. NY, NY: The New Yorker, 1966-71. Canvas PDF.

Howe, Elizabeth A. *Close Reading: An Introduction to Literature*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education Inc, 2010.

“Woody Allen Biography.” *The Biography Channel.com*. n.p., May 2013. Web. 18 June 2013.