

Understanding Death, Religion and Pandemic through the movie “*The Seventh Seal*”

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Abstract— *This paper is an attempt to study the aspects of death and religion the movie The Seventh Seal with respect to the present pandemic. This paper tries to identify different instances in the movie that the protagonist Antonius Block displays elements of doubt, faith and courage which is relatable to every individual. This paper tries to examine how the character of Antonius uses different strategies to buy time from death in order to find answers to his questions. This paper tries to focus on how the character of Antonius ultimately manages to find his one redemptive act and how the act portrays the human aspect of interdependences. It also tries to study the different aspects of the movie with respect to its bearing in our everyday lives.*

Keywords— *Death, Faith, Pandemic, Present Times.*

The movie *The Seventh Sea* portrays some of the most important aspects of life. The movie begins with a knight, Antonius Block returning from the crusade. He is encountered by death. Death is personified as a man. He encounters death on a deserted beach and challenges death to a game of chess. This act of challenging death is not an act of avoiding death but an act of delaying the inevitable fate that is waiting for him. He wants to delay his time of death in order to accomplish a redemptive act.

The movie despite portraying Black Death in its back drop seems to be a constant reminder to the audience about the continuous presence of death throughout one’s life. Death is not only physically present as a person throughout the movie but symbolically as well. There are scenes in the movie which portray corpses and skull masks that are found along the way that serve as a reminder to the spectators of the constant presence of death. This draws focus to the fact that death is not a final event that awaits each one of us but rather a companion that seems to be beside us throughout our lives. This is portrayed in the movie when Antonius asks death if he had arrived to fetch him and death replies back saying “I have long walked at your side” (Ekelund, 1957, 00:04:24-00:04:26). The characters in the movie also seem to acknowledge the closeness life has with death, some of them fear death, while others are only trying to accomplish one meaningful act before they succumb to their final fate. Pictor paints pictures which portray “the dance of death” only “to

remind people they will die” (Ekelund, 1957, 00:17:03-00:17:05).

The aspect of death personified plays an even important role as it is the presence of death that urges or pushes the knight to take action, a redemptive one. The fact that the protagonist takes action only when death shows up plays a pivotal role in the movie. The inaction one indulges in life can be understood as a result of the fear of death that grips us when one thinks of death. This fear in turn can be viewed as a result of the ambiguity and hollowness we attribute to death. It is this ambiguity and hollowness that prevents humans to take action while we have the time to do so. The paradox of living can be understood from the fact that the fear of death prevents one from taking action and it is only in the face of death that one comes to realise that the life that was lived was an empty and a meaningless one. Once the meaninglessness is replaced by knowledge and the constant presence of death recognized, the fear of death is replaced by taking action.

The movie portrays not only the backdrop of the plague but also man’s constant pursuit for meaning and answers to quintessential questions. The protagonist, Antonius is in constant search for answers after his encounter with death. He refuses to believe that life is empty and meaningless despite the various meaningless events that happen around him. Antonius serves as a reminder that we, much like him, often end up searching for meaning and sense in our lives after the passage of crucial events. The questions that the knight, Antonius Block asks throughout the movie also

makes the viewer's reflect on their own questions in life. The reasoning that the Knight indulges in, allows the viewers to find their own reasons and answers to the questions put forward by them.

The aspect of finding meaning comes hand in hand with the aspect of faith. Faith and religious beliefs are portrayed in a way which urges viewers to examine their personal belief about the two aspects. Antonius is constantly struggling in his relationship with God, he is not entirely convinced that God exists but at the same time knows for sure that he exists, this is portrayed when he states "why is he, despite all, a mocking reality I can't be rid of?" (Ekelund, 1957, 00:21:02-00:21:06). The interesting aspect in his search for answers is that he hopes to meet the Devil in order to know about God. Much like the paradox of understanding life when met with death. Antonius when faced by death ultimately surrenders to God, this act of surrendering to a higher power seems to serve as the answer to many of his unanswered questions. Antonius being a man who didn't possess faith in God accepts that his faith needs to be strong enough that he needs to rely on impalpable proof and signs, as scary and doubtful as it seems to him, he decides to accept it.

Another important aspect of the movie is the focus on the hypocrisies of people that claim to be religious. Raval who was in the seminary in Roskilde, was the one who encouraged Antonius to go for the Holy Crusade, he is found to be stealing from the dead and tries to rape a girl. This shows that people who claim to be religious or close to God need not necessarily indulge in good actions. Raval succeeded in getting Antonius to go and join the holy crusade but he himself abstained from it. Thus, portraying that Raval knew, what he had convinced Antonius as holy was not that holy indeed and he did not intend to be a part of it himself. The way of life he chooses to live is also a questionable one, he steals from the dead and makes a living out of it. Once when caught by a girl, tries to rape her, who then is saved by Jons. Jons is the squire of Antonius Block. In spite of being warned by Jons, Raval is seen again to falsely accuse Jof of stealing the blacksmiths wife. The character of Raval is in contrast to Jons, though Raval seems to claim faith in God, does no good deed whereas Jons who does not seem to be affected by anything emotional or spiritual is seen to be carrying out most of the good deeds in the movie.

Another interesting similarity between the present pandemic and the movie *The Seventh Seal* is that it brings into focus the moral narrative that seems to accompany many challenging times. When people cannot grasp the pandemic around them "the only solution ends up moralizing the pandemic" (Parsitau, 2009, p. 53). During

the Black Death in the mid-14th century, people "considered the epidemic as a warning or punishment by God" (Dols, 1974, p.377) as a result for the sins committed by men. This is also portrayed in the movie multiple times, Pictor paints a picture of flagellants whipping each other and themselves as atonement for their sins, there is also an actual procession of flagellants that takes place after the play scene of Mia and Jof. This can be understood as a result of people understanding the plague as a punishment of God. There have been many narratives which interpret the pandemic as nature's way of paying back to humanity's destructive ways of life. Though this narrative might not hold true for many in the present times it does help us to examine our relationship with nature and our environment. With the development of science and medicine, we have far moved away from the superstitious narrative of God's wrath as the fruition of pandemic but something worse has replaced that narrative with the progress of science. In spite of our faith in science, the pandemic is still rapidly spreading, the faith in God's wrath as fruition of pandemic is replaced now with the supreme faith in science, this portrays that we might not after all be very different from the Scandinavian peasants in the movie. Science has reduced the aspect of nature to that of merely being present to be in use by us. It has also led us to think that nature in a certain sense is under our control. This has led us to view nature as solely present for our use rather than possessing any value in itself. The pandemic does in a certain sense provide us the circumstance to examine the way we treat nature. It does urge us to change our relationship with nature.

In conclusion the movie portrays one of the pivotal aspects of life, the interconnectedness and the interdependence of humans with one and other. The ultimate act of redemption that Antonius indulges in, is made possible only because of the presence of the people that he saved. This serves as a reminder to all of us that sometimes meaning and answers to life can be found in the act of serving another being. In the present scenario when we seem to lose faith and hope, the character of Antonius serves as a reminder that the redemptive act lies in the fact that one needs to take action and the glory of the action lies in the fact that the existential questions can be answered and comprehended in our everyday acts of goodness and compassion to another being.

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