



## Woody Allen's 'God': A Reflection on Absurdity

Medha Bhadra Chowdhury

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Woody Allen's 'God' (1975) is a reflection of the absurdity of human life. The scenes incorporated in 'God' traverse different periods and different locations. There is a sense of randomness which is so evident in human life itself yet the play appears almost intentionally to be deprived of any element of dramatic spectacle. The play lacks a logical linear progression, with the sudden introduction of random characters, who virtually have no connection to those present on stage. There is in fact no plot which the play can boast of, the sequence of events is difficult to trace as there are illogical jumps between different worlds. The world of ancient Greece gives way to modern day Manhattan. Even the characters belong to different ages from Trichinosis to Hepatitis. The author uses the technique of a play within a play, which explains the intrusion of characters in the audience such as Doris, as well as the writer of the play, Lorenzo Miller in the midst of the dramatic action which involves the principal characters, Diabetes and Hepatitis. The chorus on the other hand stands apart from the imagined audience in the play, as an essential part of the Greek drama which Diabetes and Hepatitis attempt to perform.

However confusing the worlds may be, Allen knits them together so well that it reveals a perfect grip on the story. The readers may orient the play towards religious and metaphysical perspectives fundamentally through the question which concludes the play but remains unanswered "Is there a God?" But the possible spiritual extension of the action cannot be systematically understood as it depends on the reception of the performance and it would be entirely ridiculous to try to lend to the author any intention of taking a position with regard to faith and atheism. Instead, the play projects certain palpable realities of human life, that which lies in the realm of natural instinct. The egoism of the 'powerful' represented by the figure of the nameless 'King', the fears, terrors and abjection of the 'ordinary' rendered through the character of Diabetes, who performs the role of a slave in the parallel plot and the confused aspirations of the 'artist' brought sharply to our experience by the fact that the play lacks a "good ending" as Diabetes and Hepatitis lament.

Essentially the play focuses on the writer, Hepatitis and the actor, Diabetes as they attempt to find an ending to their new play. They suffer the uncertainties born out of the lack of concrete endings and unfinished business that often arise in the modern consciousness like terrifying visions. The anxiety originates from the struggle to find 'meaning' which is constantly deferred or turned upon us as sinisterly as the boulder on Sisyphus. Even as these two characters are zipped back and forth in time, the location remains the same throughout the entire play signifying the constancy of our living condition in a miserable world where God is dead; killed by Trichinosis' machine. Jean-Paul Sartre in his play, 'The Devil and the Good Lord' (1951) writes, "I killed God because he divided me from Mankind, and now I see that his death has isolated me even more." It is therefore, problematic that the emptiness and stasis of the play and indeed our lives are both caused by the perceived absence of God and his absence is forced by our rejection of him.

'God' takes place in an abandoned Greek amphitheatre although the play alternates between diverse time periods. These chaotic shifts are never clear to the viewer of the play. There are no transitional cues and minimal stage directions. It is the characters which provide the links between the different phases of time. Ultimately, Diabetes and Hepatitis realize that their play cannot have an ending or for that matter a beginning since life is too complicated and absurd to map out with words. Their sense of alienation hardens and the lurking doubt that there is no saviour is actualised when the machine brutally strangles the actor playing God. Ironically, it is the malfunctioning machine which rescues the poor Diabetes from the fury of the King, who comes to resent the affirmation of God's existence. Despite the convoluted structure of events and random incidents, a single truth emerges poignantly: that man is miserable and that there is no definite ending and therefore no absolutes in the world he inhabits.

The stylistic devices which Allen employs give structure to the play, despite the lack of a concrete plot. The play is formulated using a cyclical pattern where the opening mirrors the end.

“Actor: Nothing. Just nothing

Writer: What?

Actor: Meaningless. It's empty.

Writer: The ending.

Actor: Of course. What are we discussing? We're discussing the ending.

Writer: We're always discussing the ending.

Actor: Because it's hopeless.” ...

It is interesting to note, how Allen's dialogues serve as indicators; assisting us in our understanding of the play. The actor refers to a 'circle' which 'has no beginning, middle or end'. The remark sheds light on the nature of the play itself. It has no beginning, middle or end. Thus, while reading the play one cannot possibly judge it in terms of the Aristotelian concept of the well-made play. If one seeks a climax as expected by Aristotle, a resolution while reading the play, one is sure to be disappointed. Much like the absurdist plays of Beckett and Pinter, 'God' does not ascribe to the conventional form of Classical drama which we are so familiar with. It is perhaps this peculiar structural tendency which makes 'God' so very modern in its approach. One of the greatest advantages of this particular form is that it does not impart to the play an end stopped quality, which would have essentially destroyed the purpose of the play and given the readers no scope for further thought or interpretation. In this context, the theme of the play must be brought into focus. What is the play about?

The title gives us the most obvious answer- God. Is it ever possible to conclusively decide any argument on the existence of God? The existence of God is a debatable topic. "Is there a god?" is the "question of questions" which the King asks and the "one word answer" he receives from the messenger is "Yes". Despite the positive response, the King remains dissatisfied.

“If there is a god, then man is not responsible and I will surely be judged for my sins.”

The presence of god fills the King with a sense of doom. He would much rather have escaped divine justice and wishes to be accountable to himself for his crimes rather than to god. The news does not create in him a sense of security or religious faith as which would seem so natural if we were to receive such affirmation of god's existence. Strangely, it gives birth to the fear of judgement and punishment in his mind. Allen draws our attention to the queer response of his characters to the idea of god.

Allen had once said, "To you I'm an atheist. To god I'm a loyal opposition." What Allen is basically trying to establish is a balance between the idea that god does not exist and the belief that as individuals we have the rightful authority to invest whatever meaning we think is best to the concept of god. Whether we regard him as an all-powerful entity who reigns supreme or a 'dead' concept is completely a matter of personal belief. Thus, as a counter point to the idea that god is dead, Allen presents the fictional character of Blanche Dubois from the play, "The Streetcar Named Desire", who is seen seeking desperate consolation in her faith that god exists.

“Mr. Tennessee Williams...He dropped me in the center of a nightmare...Once outside the Kowalski residence, I broke free and ran. I've got to get into another play, a play where God exists...somewhere I can rest at last. That's why you must put me in your play.”

Both points of view are presented. However, the idea that god is dead is superimposed onto the narrative. The metaphorical idea that god is dead in the modern world is carried through by the very literal demise of the actor playing god or Zeus on stage. When the time to save the helpless mortal arrives and the elaborate mechanism designed by Trichinosis is lowered onto the stage, the audience is faced with the spectacle of a dead man. "God is dead" exclaims Diabetes. A line which echoes Nietzsche's famous proclamation,

“God is dead. God remains dead and we have killed him.”

We learn from Diabetes how "His neck is broken." by pulling the wrong lever. Laced with humour, the situation draws our attention to a deeper level of meaning which assumes metaphorical relevance. God is dead because he cannot save us. The doctor further pronounces after a rather clinical examination, "He is definitely dead. We better move him." God has to be moved away. He has been displaced in the modern world from the position he previously enjoyed. He no longer holds any importance and it is left to the human, Diabetes to help himself in a moment of crisis.

“The slave decides to be a hero.” The human being is presented as his own saviour. He rescues himself from a situation of potential danger through the use of his own ability and strength. He grabs the sword from King Oedipus and kills him instead. It is comic that the sword is a fake and nobody dies, but the very act of self-preservation is remarkable since it involves no divine assistance as was previously decided. Despite the dialogue on the existence of god, Allen does not appear preachy or didactic at any point. The play's message lies in whatever the audience chooses to take back with them, it is open ended and is in no way guided by the playwright's moral intentions.

Thus, when Hepatitis says, "This is a very serious play with a message. If it falls apart they'll never get the message." The woman replies, "The theatre is for entertainment. There's an old saying, if you want to send a message, call Western Union." The entry of the Western Union delivery boy immediately after lends the scene a remarkable sense of humour which is half ridiculous, half serious and is at the same time in keeping with Allen's intention of producing an absurdist farce.

The deliberate blurring of all lines of difference between reality and art is a technique that further adds to the complexity of 'God'. The characters argue that they are not fictional. Each tries to prove that they are real. The audience referred to in the play, we realize is fictional as Lorenzo explains,

"I wrote; a large group of people from Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan and Long Island come to the Golden Theater and watch the play."

This means that Doris is fictional as well, though Allen's crafty presentation of her character makes her appear almost as a member of the real audience instead of the imagined audience on stage. The ease with which she rises from her seat and becomes a part of the play happening on stage blends our sense of the real and fictional. The writer, Hepatitis brings up a relevant point in this context. "But if we're not real, we can't die." Lorenzo replies, "No, not unless the playwright decides to kill us." The divergence between the real world and the stage world is brought into sharp focus. The play is guided by the playwright and the death or life of a character can only be determined by him. Much like Pirandello's 'Six Characters in Search of an Author', the characters seem to function on their own volition, self-controlling their entrances and exits, finding their own distinctive roles within the play and establishing connections with each other and with the action unfolding on stage. However, in the end it is made very clear that these characters are works of art, an imaginative creation of the playwright and despite their false autonomy on stage they must still adhere to the design provided by the playwright. The play is pervaded with the tone of farcical humour, however, the occasional phone call from the creator (Woody Allen) further reinforces the difference between art and life enabling the readers to distinguish between the real and the theatrical.

In the midst of the absurd sequence of events, the philosophical question about the nature of reality strikes a significant chord. Doris says, "Who knows what reality really is?". The nature of human life is similarly confusing, "So often people think they grasp reality when what they're really responding to is fakeositude."

Woody Allen provides his readers with so many witty, yet contradictory puzzles, that it is impossible to draw any solid conclusions.

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