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Annie Hall – A Discussion

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I

This 1977 film starts with a problem. Alvy Singer tells us that he and Annie Hall have broken up. As Alvy says, "I still can't get my mind around that." A year ago they were in love, but now things are different....I keep sifting the pieces of the relationship through my mind and trying to figure out where did the screw-up come...and."

So why did they break up? That's the problem.

And we, the viewer, might want to pose another problem: Why does Alvy want to know? What's driving this mental self-interrogation? What would he do with this insight?

The format of the film is intriguing. It is not a straightforward narrative. Rather we are treated to a series of vignettes involving Alvy and Annie, the building blocks of their relationship and its disintegration. The film is a pastiche of "cutaways" -- the action moves quickly from one scene to another without connecting links. The film mimics how our memory works as we try to recall events -- not sequentially but bits and pieces, fleeting scenes that float up into the mind as Alvy tries to puzzle out what went wrong.

We are treated to flashbacks to Alvy's upbringing, to his house under the roller coaster, to his mother and father and even his physician. We learn -- briefly -- of his previous marriage to Allison. We see how Alvy and Annie met, how they move in together, how they get along in public, how they go to California. We learn of their mutual insecurities and Alvy's constant preoccupation with the topic of death. Every book he gave Annie had 'death' in the title. Towards the end of the film, we understand that Annie is living with Tony out in California. Alvy flies from New York to L.A. There we witness a surrealistic scene where Alvy proposes marriage to Annie in a restaurant on Sunset Boulevard, totally oblivious to where she is coming from. We see Alvy leaving the restaurant bewildered why she won't return to New York with him. We learn of their subsequent brief encounters, back in New York. Throughout the film, Alvy comes across as a self-obsessed, self-absorbed person riddled with anxieties and concerns. He struggles to maintain a relationship with Annie without knowing what's wrong.

So, why didn't their relationship work? That's the question the film poses. We are invited into their lives, to understand their interactions and to help piece together the puzzle of failed love in the midst of anxiety. Are relationships, as Alvy maintains, "totally irrational and crazy and absurd"? Perhaps, as Alvy says in the last line of the film, we keep going through various relationships, because "most of us need the eggs," the small tangible benefits of hanging in. Is that the message? Are relationships merely irrational, crazy and absurd?

There are, perhaps, other ways of understanding the Alvy-Annie relationship and these are hinted at in the film. Alvy's Mother, for instance, gives us this perspective on him, "You always only saw the worst in people. You never could get along with anyone at school. You were always out of step with the world. Even when you got famous, you still distrusted the world." Maybe his mother was right. Maybe Alvy's disconnect with reality represents the key to understanding his problem.

But there are other ways of viewing the relationship and I'll return to these a bit later.

Let's consider first Alvy and anxiety; then Alvy and love; and then examine several possible reasons why he and Annie broke up.

II

So, first, anxiety.

We are all anxious from time to time. We all have to deal with uncertainty, the unknown and the various concerns that impact our lives. Often these temporary anxieties concern family issues, health or work-related unknowns. Alvy's anxiety, however, goes far beyond this normal occurrence. For one thing, anxiety represents his *usual* state – his normal -- and he worries incessantly about all the dreadful things that can happen. For him, anxiety represents his way of being: it's habitual and it permeates his everyday life. He is constantly preoccupied with the consequences of actions that seem far-fetched or even silly to us – but, as voyeurs of his life, we find them witty and humorous. He seems unable to control his anxiety and it justifies his not doing anything. He is paralyzed by his own anxiety about which he obsesses constantly.

Alvy exhibits anxious behaviour over many facets of his life. All the things that his parents told him were good for him -- such as sun, milk, red meat, college – all these are all dismissed as bad. He is anxious about showering in front of other men....who knows what could happen he says. He is anxious about Annie's previous relationships – with Dennis in high school and Jerry the actor – and he's dismissive of their significance for her and her life. He doesn't want to go on stage after another comedian. He becomes ill just before his TV show in L.A. He can't enter the theatre after the show has

started, even just the trailers. He can't stand people in line pontificating about films or the pronouncements of Marshall McLuhan.

The list goes on. He constantly sees evidence of anti-Semitism – as when a person says 'couldjou' (could Jew), or at dinner with Annie's relatives where he thinks they think of him as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, or when he says that "the rest of the country looks upon New York like we're left-wing communist, Jewish, homosexual, pornographers." He accuses Annie of having an affair with David, her college professor, who teaches a course on Existential Motifs in Russian Literature which he mocks as a crap course on Contemporary Crisis in Western Man. He stalks her which he rationalizes as spying, not following, wanting to know the truth about Annie and David.

Alvy is anxious and this anxiety permeates his life and all his interactions.

III

Next, what about love, sex, romance?

Here Alvy's anxiety intrudes, but it's not just one way. After seeing *The Sorrow and the Pity* – a 4-hour film shot in 1969 -- Annie and Alvy are in bed. She is concerned about how she'd stand up to torture. She doesn't want to have sex even though Alvy reminisces that at first their love-making would have qualified them for an entry into the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

Most of the time, however, it is Alvy's anxieties that get in the way of intimacy, such as his concern that President Kennedy may have been assassinated by multiple shooters and that the Warren Commission might be wrong. His anxieties over her former partners play a role, too, as well as her more recent encounters such as the person who took her to a rock concert and her relationship with her college professor. Anxieties also come to the fore at the night club when Annie is ironically singing "Seems Like Old Times." There she meets Tony who wants to advance her career and work together. Alvy is clearly jealous, senses a threat and refuses to go to a party or to help Annie further her career.

IV

So, back to the problem posed in the film. Why did Alvy and Annie's relationship fail? For starters, let's itemize the reasons given in the film.

1. His mother says he is out of step with the world.
2. Alvy says his first wife Allison left him because he was too crazy.
3. Annie tells Alvy that he doesn't want to make a real commitment.
4. Annie says Alvy doesn't take her seriously because she is not smart enough.
5. Annie tells Alvy he never wants to try anything new.
6. A woman on the street simply says, "love fades."

7. Alvy wonders if he always went for the wrong woman, such as falling in love with the Wicked Queen rather than Snow White.
8. Alvy's jealousy of other men in Annie's life, such as her college professor, David, and the famous record personality, Tony Lacey, who suggests working together and who invites her to a party.

Here's reason #9. Annie says to Alvy, "I don't think our relationship is working." Alvy agrees, "A relationship is like a shark. It has to constantly move forward or it dies. I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark." Is this a dead shark situation? Is this why the relationship failed?

There are several other ways of analyzing Annie and Alvy's relationship.

In approaching reason #10, let's observe how Alvy typically talks. His anxiety exhibits a repetitive verbal pattern. It goes as follows: if I were to do X, then Y and Z would happen. Y and Z are not desirable. Therefore I won't do X. In logic, this pattern is known as *modus tollens*. Some examples:

- If I were to live in the country, there would be crickets, noise, no place to walk after dinner, screens with dead moths, the Manson family. All of these are undesirable. Therefore I wouldn't live in the country.
- Or, if I were to shower in a public place, I'd be naked in front of other men and you never know what's going to happen. I don't want any of these bad things to happen. Therefore I never shower in a public place.

Almost all of Alvy's anxieties are expressed in terms of what he thinks of as negative predictable consequences. While humorous, they are far-fetched and strike us as absurd, out of touch with the world, as his mother correctly notes. This form of argumentation was common in the 1970's during the Viet Nam war. One instance of it is: If Viet Nam were to fall to the Communists, then so too would the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and maybe even Australia. There are undesirable. Therefore Viet Nam should not fall to the communists. This domino-effect argument was widely used to justify the war in Viet Nam. It was a call to intervention.

In Alvy's case, however, this pattern of reasoning has the opposite effect. If p, then q. Not-q. Therefore not-p. Once we see the repetitive pattern, we immediately see two things. First, that Alvy uses this form of reasoning not to do, as Annie correctly points out, he doesn't want to do anything new. She's right. It's a justification for not acting. Also, secondly, we see something else. And here is reason #10 why their relationship failed: Alvy is ... how shall we put it? ... well, he's downright **boring!**

But there's a deeper reason why their relationship failed.

V

Reason #11 – the final one that I'll cite -- builds on Alvy's habitual mode of discourse: citing a cascade of negative consequences. The question is, how realistic are these negative consequences?

Note here that Annie never ever dismisses or challenges these negative consequences, the way we might do. “Come off it, Alvy,” we might say, or “are you really serious? These are absurd reasons.”

The pattern goes back to Alvy’s childhood. As a youth, Alvy tells the doctor that the universe is expanding and that at some point it will be stretched to the breaking-point. That death of the universe justifies what his mother describes as his depression and his reluctance to do anything. There is a dreadful future and his anxiety about this dire outcome justifies Alvy’s refusal to do anything. Interestingly, the doctor doesn’t disagree with Alvy. He doesn’t say ‘that’s absurd.’ Nobody challenges Alvy in the film. All the doctor says is that the break-up of the cosmos is a long way off.

This has the effect of reinforcing in Alvy’s mind that it’s all right to think of consequences and that consequences are usually negative. This validation sets the tone and pattern for much of his life. It’s a script that has to do with death and his inability to think of strategies for dealing with finality. In existentialist terms, if being results in non-being, why be? Or in the terms of the American Protestant philosopher and theologian, Paul Tillich, Why should Alvy ever be expected to have the courage to be – the title of one of Tillich’s best books – when he is constantly mired in his obsession with non-being.

Underlying all of Alvy’s diffuse anxieties is one over-riding anxiety, namely death anxiety. A preoccupation with death.

Alvy is concerned with the death of the universe, the death of his relationship with Annie, President Kennedy’s death, books which have ‘death’ in their title. He’s preoccupied with the subject of death generally and the finality of existence. Several books are referred to from time to time, such as Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*; Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death*; Jacques Choron, *Death and Western Thought*. This preoccupation with death may provide a clue as to the reason for Alvy’s anxiety.

Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* was written four years before Annie Hall, in 1973. Its basic premise is that culture represents a symbolic act of defiance against the certainty of death. According to Becker, an American anthropologist and social historian, we create illusions or symbolic representations that allow us to overcome the feelings of powerlessness in face of ultimate termination. These symbolic representations give us a feeling of meaning, connectedness to something immortal and so help us face life with confidence. Death anxiety seems to be the source of Alvy’s distress in general.

This brings us to reason #1. Alvy is paralyzed by his fear of death. He is so preoccupied with non-being that he cannot be. It’s a failure to have the courage to be or to embrace cultural representations that give meaning and connectedness to life.

Seen in this light, Annie Hall represents a contribution to existentialist thought, a perspective very much in vogue in the USA in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Such works as the following come to mind:

- Albert Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus* [1942; English translation 1955] -- contends life is inherently without meaning.

- Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* (Angst), originally published in 1844 but translated into English only in 1944 -- argues that much of human existence is characterized by anxiety.
- Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* first published in 1938 but translated into English 1965 -- describes how humans are condemned to freedom in a world that is indifferent to human feeling or involvement.
- Erich Fromm's influential *Escape from Freedom*, 1941 -- argues that people willingly give up their ability to choose in the face of anxiety and uncertainty.
- Paul Tillich, living in New York, wrote *The Courage to Be* in 1955 -- focuses on the uncertainty of being and yet affirms the necessity to have the courage to be.
- And, of course, Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*.

I've cited 11 reasons why Alvy and Annie's relationship failed. Maybe Alvy was correct in his insight that we have a dead shark relationship on our hands. Alvy is so paralyzed by his death anxiety that he is unable to move forward.

Or maybe Mummy was right after all: Alvy was just out of step with the world.

What do you think?