

"As Good as it Gets": A Study of Sibling Rivalry

Movie makers have long been intrigued by psychiatric disorders. Films dealing with depersonalization, split personality, nightmares, paranoid delusions, phobias, hysterical paralysis, to name only a few diagnostic entities, abound. Surprisingly, there are comparatively few, if any films, that deal at length, or in-depth, with the obsessive compulsive neurosis. A timely contribution that corrects this deficit is the recent Tristar - Gracie Film release "As Good As it Gets" starring Jack Nicholson.

The film centers about the character Melvin, played by Mr. Nicholson. Melvin can hardly be called a hero. He is a bitingly hostile, reclusive misanthrope plagued by endless compulsions, yet the novels he writes bespeak a tender, sensitive, romantic spirit. The dynamics of this strange, contradictory combination of qualities, are suggested, but not explicitly stated. As the plot unfolds, the evidence accumulates suggesting how a bitter disappointment following

the birth of a younger brother who deprived Melvin of his mother's love and nourishment eventuated in Melvin's obsessive compulsive neurosis and character. Evidence for this theme is repetitively portrayed in at least three different sets of triangular relationships involving Melvin, a mothering figure, and representations of intrusive sibling rivals. The first of these takes the form of a noisy puppy who urinates on Melvin. The second triangle consists of the asthmatic young son of Carol, the waitress-mother, and finally, the threesome composed of Melvin, Carol and the sweet, inoffensive, homosexual painter Simon, the younger sibling representative, who in the course of the film, loses his parents, mother's love and his father's sustenance. In the end, through each of these relationships, Melvin is transformed and gets to love and support the dog, the waitress, and the gay artist.

The opening scene is a true prologue in the complete literal sense of the word. Melvin has come upon a cute little puppy in the hallway in front of his apartment. He offers the dog to a gentle, middle-aged neighbor who refuses to accept it. Failing to coax the puppy, who is barking noisily, into the elevator, he picks it up, and as he does so, the dog urinates on him. At this point, Melvin says "You pissed on your last floor you dog eared monkey." He opens the garbage chute and drops the puppy in. The oral destructiveness is undeniable. The garbage chute is the equivalent of the alimentary

canal, (birth canal) the repository of waste. When the dog is found and returned to its owner Simon, the super of the building says he found it in "diaper shit." The anal aspects of Melvin's murderous aggression become clear when he tells Simon, his neighbor and the dog's owner, never to bother him even if he has died and his corpse emits an unbearable, overwhelming, stench. Intimidated, Simon slinks back into his apartment, but Frank, Mrs manager, protector and essentially the representative of morality, is not so easily put off. He threatens Melvin with dire punishment if Simon and the dog Verdell are injured in any way. Like a panic stricken little boy, Melvin yells "Help! Police! etc."

This symbolic representation of murdering a younger sibling is followed by a depiction of some of Melvin's compulsions. His room is obsessively neat and orderly. ~~He locks and unlocks the door five~~ times and does the same with the lights. Fearing dirt and contamination, he resorts to compulsive hand washing, even rejecting the first bar of soap.

While Melvin is on his way to the restaurant, we become aware of a very significant compulsion. He must avoid stepping on the cracks in the pavement. This, of course, recalls the childhood ditty, "step on a crack . . . break your mother's back." This symptom constitutes a reaction formation to hostile wishes against a mother.

In the restaurant he is forced to wait for his table. His personal feeding station has been preempted by strangers. Menacingly, he drives them from the table, triumphantly makes himself comfortable, unwraps a sterile set of eating utensils, and calls out to the waitress "I'm starving." When she rebukes him for his untoward behavior toward the previous occupants of the table, he is angry. She tells him "This is not your table. You have to wait your turn." Melvin is quick to retaliate. Moments later when Carol comments that the diet that Melvin is pursuing, so rich in fat and cholesterol, will cause him to die soon, he delivers the cruelest blow of all "We're all going to die soon . . . it sure sounds like your son will." He had overheard the waitresses talking about Carol's son's illness, and he uses this knowledge as a cruel rebuke to Carol. It also expresses an underlying wish for her son to die. What he had tried to do to the puppy Verdell, he now anticipates happening to Carol's son Spencer.

Although the next scene does not directly Melvin, the scene in which the youngster Spencer interferes with the pleasure of his mother and the young man is explicit. Carol is entertaining a date in her bedroom, but as they begin to make love, it is clear that she is not involved. She cannot give herself fully to respond to his caresses. Her mind is on Spencer who is having one of his asthmatic attacks. She leaves the would-be lover abruptly to attend to Spencer who is now vomiting. After caring for him, she returns to her bedroom to

discover her would-be lover playing with an unlit cigarette. She admonishes him that smoking is prohibited because of her son's asthmatic condition. When they resume love-making, as the young man approaches Carol's breast, he is disgusted to find some of Spencer's vomit on her clothes. He is turned off by the mess and indifferent to Carol's urgings, and he turns away in disgust and leaves. Thus, Verell's urinating on Melvin is paralleled by Spencer's vomiting on the would-be lover.

At this point, we are made aware of another aspect of Melvin's personality, a tender loving quality that he expresses in the delicate prose and erotic love scenes of his novels. He impresses one as a man who has been deeply hurt, and is afraid to risk close human interaction. Much as he yearns for love, he fears rejection and humiliation.

At this point, the story line of the film bifurcates into two parallel directions. Simon is robbed and beaten by some hoodlum friends of a gay man who had just finished posing for him. It was Melvin who summoned the police. Simon has to be hospitalized and there is no one to care for Verdell. Frank forces Melvin to care for the dog. Melvin notices that Carol is not at work. He truculently insists that she come and serve him. The manager of the restaurant expells him much to the delight of the other customers. Melvin

manages to get Carol's address and hurries to her house in the middle of the day to discover her desperately caring for the sick Spencer. She resents Melvin's intrusion and asks him to leave, which he does. He seems unable to understand why she was not at the restaurant to serve him. After he leaves, Carol discovers that Spencer's temperature is high, and she rushes to take him to the hospital. She sees Melvin about to enter a cab and asks to share it with him to take Spencer to the hospital. He agrees, but as he is about to leave, he asks her if she is coming back to the restaurant to take care of him. She tells him "Drop dead." This is followed by a sequence in the film where Melvin arranges for a very competent physician to take over Spencer's care at his expense. Thus, as he has agreed to take care of Verdell for Simon's sake, he now sustains Spencer for Carol's sake. Carol is overwhelmed when she learns that Melvin has arranged for the doctor to treat her son, but her feelings of affection and gratitude are displaced from him Melvin onto the doctor who has agreed to care of the child.

At first, Melvin refuses to take Verdell, protesting "Nobody has ever been in here before" and the first thing he says to the dog is "You're dead." Then in keeping with his fundamental conflict he says "I don't have dog food, and I don't want dog food here. You'll eat what we have, you'll eat what we eat." Nevertheless, a strain of pleasure, of satisfaction, seems to appear. He takes Verdell with him

to the restaurant, and shifts his place to another table to be closer where he can observe Verdell, who is just outside the entrance to the restaurant. He even shares his bacon with the dog. These manifestations of caring on Melvin's part amaze Carol. What a contrast to how he behaved concerning her son!

On the way home from the restaurant, Melvin notices how Verdell is mimicking his compulsion not to step on cracks in the sidewalk. He lifts the dog up and says "Don't be like me . . . you're a perfect man. I'm going to take you home and give you something to eat, what you love." Once at home, Melvin completes the novel he had been working on with a very tender love passage. In an affectionate mood, he turns to the dog, and by a classical representation by the opposite says "Yes, I hate the dogge. Yes - I hate the doggie."

By the time Simon returns from the hospital Verdell has bonded with Melvin, and in his behavior clearly indicates, that he prefers Melvin to Simon. Simon is deeply hurt. After Melvin returns the dog, he is overcome by this loss. He cannot hold back his tears, and he cries "Over the dog . . . an ugly dog." Precipitously, he runs to his former therapist who refuses to see him without an appointment. Again, he feels he has been abandoned. As he leaves the office, he blurts out to the patients in the waiting room "Is this as good as it gets?"

This beginning transformation of Melvin into a giving, caring, person, is the turning point of the film. Home from the hospital, Simon learns that he is ruined financially. The medical bills have left him impecunious. His friends refuse to help, and he feels that he cannot turn to his parents. Even Verdell, the dog, has turned from him to Melvin. Cruel as ever, Melvin rubs it in to Simon by saying, that the cleaning (a mother figure) and his "qucer" party friends have all abandoned him, Simon can take no more. For the first time, he strikes back at Melvin calling him "An absolute horror of a human being." For once, Melvin is touched. He tries to defend himself by giving Simon the secret of how he has won Verdell's loyalty and affection - a few strips of bacon. Together, they begin to share their love for Verdell.

In the meantime, Carol moved by Melvin's unexpected generosity, but made cautious by ambivalence, nevertheless, impulsively dashes through the rain to Melvin's door to thank him, but also to warn him, that she will never have sex with him. In keeping with the underlying theme of sexual oral seduction, Carol's rain soaked blouse clings to her skin prominently revealing the nipples of her breasts. She is embarrassed. Melvin seems unimpressed, and he dismisses her in his characteristically sarcastic fashion. This is the pathetic aspect of Melvin's character. He is a man who feels abandoned, alone, and unloved, but his fear of repudiation, and his anger are so great, that



he dare not risk acknowledging love when it is offered, or, ever declaring his real feelings. He is like the child who feels abandoned and repudiated, and doesn't know how to get back into the good graces of his mother. He is just too hurt, too angry.

It is at this point in the film, that the two triangles, Melvin, Simon and Verdell, and Melvin, Carol and Spencer, coalesce. Through a number of interrelated conditions, Melvin, Simon and Carol, are brought together, heading for Baltimore, where Simon intends to ask his parents for financial aid. Carol has agreed to join the trip out of gratitude to Melvin. With characteristic cruelty, he introduces his would-be travel companions "This is Carol, the waitress. This is Simon, the lag." At first she sits in the back seat of the convertible, while the injured Simon sits alongside, an insouciant Melvin, who is disregard of his fellow passengers keeps playing his favorite tapes. Somewhat later, when Carol does the driving and Melvin sits in the back, she has the opportunity to get to know Simon. His is a sad story. When he was a young boy, his mother "innocently" posed nude while Simon sketched her. One day his father discovered them and beat Simon severely. When Simon was ready to go off to college, his father handed him "A hot wad of money" and told him that he never wanted to see or hear from him again. Apparently, the mother acquiesced to this cruel arrangement. Since that time, Simon has never communicated with his parents. Carol is deeply touched and pats

Simon on the face gently. A special bond has been sealed between them. Sitting alone in the back seat, Melvin feels excluded like an importunate child. He tries to call attention to himself to intervene between Simon and Carol, but she rebuffs him.

In their hotel suite in Baltimore things begin to move rapidly. Simon is unable to reach his parents. Carol learns that Spencer is doing exceptionally well, even scoring goal in soccer. She wants to celebrate by going out to dinner. Simon is in no mood to participated, leaving Carol to share her celebration with an obviously disgruntled Melvin. She quickly changes into one of her dresses, while Melvin, obviously resentful of the rebuff in the car and angry for Carol's growing attention for Simon, keeps her waiting endlessly and takes a shower before dressing.

As one might have predicted, the date turns into a disaster. The restaurant has a dress code, and since he came to Baltimore with a jacket and would not accept one that had been worn by anyone else, Melvin has to seek out a haberdashery shop while Carol waits for him at the bar. Carol would like to dance. Melvin refuses, and instead says "I don't get this place. They make me buy and outfit, but they let you wear a housedress." He has no idea that he has insulted her. As she gets up to leave, she insists that he offer her a complement to patch things up, but he cannot find it in him to do it. He

procrastinates, orders dinner, and after a series of convoluted circumlocutions, finally is able to say "You make me want to be a better man." She is touched, and reaches to kiss him. He barely responds. He cannot bear the pleasure, and is typically compelled to spoil it. Sensing his insecurity, Carol tries to reassure him. She asks him why he brought her along and hints that she is ready to have sex with him. But that is too much for him. Instead, responding to the question as to why he brought her along, he says "There are lots of reasons. I had the thought that if you had sex with Simon . . . it might." Carol is infuriated and leaves Melvin alone and miserable.

Back at the hotel she finds Simon in despair. He's been unable to get through to his parents. He wants to die. Simon's and Carol's separate miseries now bind them together. In the ensuing scene, Simon is creatively inspired by his view of the half-naked Carol as she begins to take a bath. He assures her how beautiful she is, overcoming her reluctance to pose for him nude. His creative talents long subdued by depression, return in an overwhelming surge. He tears the bandages from his fingers and begins to sketch furiously. A loving bond has now been established between them. A reprise of the original relationship with Simon and his mother.

After a night of drunken remorse, Melvin returns to the hotel suite to find Carol and Simon wrapped in sheets gaily enjoying a

breakfast together. Melvin want to know if they had sex, and Carol replies "We held each other. It was better then sex. What I need, he gave me great." The loving contact with Carol has invigorated Simon (he has reenacted the traumatic scene of his childhood, but this time, the father figure has been defeated.) When he finally gets his mother on the telephone, he reassures her that he is well, that he bears his parents no grudges. "I don't want a thing - wouldn't take it if offered." Carol has freed him and has replaced the abandoning mother. Furthermore, the original traumatic confrontation with the father has been reversed. Melvin knows that a loving bond has been established between Carol and Simon when she posed nude and that unlike Simon's father, Melvin is unable to do anything about it. To complete the picture, he learns that he is not going to leave Simon in Baltimore. All three will return to New York.

In "real" life, this triplex adventure most likely would have ended at this point. On reaching New York, each one would return to his or her separate life to encounter their every-day miseries to experience what destiny may hold in store for them. Not so in the movies, not so in religion, or, in art. Whether it is for redemption in the future, or for vicarious if evanescent gratification in the present, one must find surcease from lifes inevitable disappointments. In the movie, back in New York, Melvin graciously enfolds the impecunious battered Simon and his dog Verdell, back into the security

of his apartment. Carol returns to her healthy son and ever helpful mother. But the flames of erotic longing now ignited in Melvin will not subside, and it is Simon who give him the courage to make a final desperate attempt to win Carol.

Simon's behavior in this context is a striking example of the origin of a certain type of homosexuality Freud described in 1922. He wrote "Observation has directed my attention to several cases in which during early childhood impulses of jealousy, derived from the mother-complex and of very great intensity, arose (in a boy) against rivals, usually older brothers. This jealousy led to an exceedingly hostile and aggressive attitude towards these brothers which might sometimes reach the pitch of actual death-wishes, but which could not maintain themselves in the face of the subject's further development. Under the influences of upbringing - and certainly not uninfluenced also by their own continuing powerlessness - these impulses yielded to repression and underwent a transformation, so that the rivals of the earlier period became the first homosexual love-objects. (p. 231)

Simon's feminine identification is unquestionable. So, for example, when he greets Verdell in Melvin's apartment, he says "I know the feeling. You feel like your old self again. Mommy and daddy are home." In keeping with the dynamics just quoted from Freud, it is Simon who convinces Melvin to pursue the disguised invitation to resume the relationship that Carol had just transmitted to Melvin by

telephone. Simon urges Melvin "The best thing you have going for you is your willingness to humiliate yourself. If it gives you one chance in whatever - so go catch her off guard." Melvin decides to take this advice and starts for the door. He stops suddenly, jolted, realizing for the first time that he had forgotten to lock the door, a break in his compulsiveness.

In Carol's apartment, Melvin is still unable to say unequivocally, that she has come because he loves her. She understands that to be the case, but is wary because of his and of her own ambivalence. Finally, she accepts him and invites him to stay. He feels uneasy - confined - surely a fear of a more intimate, erotic activity. Now, he proposes instead, that they go to a local bakery which is just about to open at five-thirty in the morning. Upon the way, they are both uncertain of the possible outcome of their reunion. He still carefully avoids stepping on cracks. She thinks that it is the better part of wisdom to leave him then and there, but a fresh unequivocal protestation of love and a second unambivalent kiss convinces her. They walk happily to the bakery, which is opening, and is set to follow her, knowingly and happily, having planted his foot on a crack in the pavement.

Cured by love? It's possible. Prognosis: guarded

Bibliography

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