A Study of Romanticism in Two Films by Woody Allen

An Honors Thesis (Id 499)

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Introduction

"...we're up against an evil, insidious, hostile universe"
-Woody Allen

At the beginning of Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977), Alvy Singer says to the camera: "There's an old joke. Uh, two elderly women are at a Catskill mountain resort and one of them says, 'Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.' And the other one says, 'Yea I know, and such small portions.' Well, that's essentially how I feel about life--full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly." The joke, structured as a thematic device for *Annie Hall*, exemplifies the paradox of mankind's existence; it also characterizes the theme of existentialism prevalent in most of Allen's motion pictures--the constant search for hope and faith in an meaningless universe. Like the two elderly women in the joke, Alvy Singer and other Allen characters find reasons to have faith in their existence, despite being faced with misery and bewilderment. This recurrent formula supports the belief that the films of Woody Allen reflect a highly Romantic quality within the framework of existentialism.

The early films of Woody Allen present his Romantic
thought as pessimistic; these films, *Love and Death* (1975) especially, examine the inabilitys of the human race to understand the mysteries of the universe. Allen's characters, continually searching for a reason to have hope, never seem to find complete answers to life's unsolvable mysteries (Commings 235). Because the Allen characters lack the ability to find concrete answers, they tend to revert to existential tendencies. Ironically, Allen himself questions his Romantic label. In response to the assertion, Woody claims, "If being against the universe is a Romantic position, then I agree.... But any existential obsession... carries with it Romantic overtones automatically" (Lax 231). Woody Allen is definitely against the universe; he says of man's existence, "It's very important to realize that we're up against an evil, insidious, hostile universe--a hostile force" (Lax 45). Whether Woody Allen would agree or not, his films, outgrowths of his existential obsession, are rooted deeply with more than just Romantic overtones; his films are permeated as well with Romantic themes and methods.

Although the films of Woody Allen, ranging from slapstick comedy to social drama, represent an unpredictable parade of styles, his theme remains constant. Woody Allen has concerned himself constantly with man's struggle against the universe. Beginning with *Love and Death*, Woody has searched for the meaning of life and for a reason to have faith in its possibilities. Although Allen has maintained a pessimistic view of human existence, he remains on a constant
quest for hope—representing the basic paradoxical nature of his films. A comparison of *Love and Death* and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) reveals an apparent shift in Allen's beliefs and may foreshadow future characteristics of his films. In these two films in particular, Allen's characters turn away from religion and conformity only to discover love as an element of hope.
Chapter One

"I become a transparent eyeball;"
-Emerson

Is there anything comical about existentialism? If one were to consider man's quest for individualism as an absurd, difficult struggle created by an "evil, insidious, hostile universe," then the philosophy could have comic tendencies. Regardless of this belief, Woody Allen realizes that man still survives. Within this unfortunate state of existence lies the exploratory nature of Allen's philosophic comedy. However, it is important to realize that Woody Allen was a comedian before he was a philosopher; considering the comic side of his career, he remarks, "By the fifth grade I had some innate knowledge of how to write funny, so much so that I would be doing references to Freud and sex, too, without knowing who he was and what it was but sensing how to use them correctly" (Lax 29). Woody Allen, the struggling fifth-grade comedian, became Woody Allen, the successful comedic filmmaker. Furthermore, understanding his continued growth in the cinematic art demands an understanding of his childhood.

Woody Allen was born under the name Allen Stewart Konigsberg on December 1, 1935, in Flatbush, New York--a
small Brooklyn community. Although Woody Allen had an ordinary Brooklyn boyhood, his life following enrollment in grammar school provides many clues to his interests and talents. Allen, possessing only disdain for formal education, asserts, "I loathed every day and regret every day I spent in school. I like to be taught to read and write and then be left alone" (Brode 14). Consequently, Allen found intellectual stimulation mainly in the form of magic, movies, and the radio. Spending weeks away from his schoolmates, Allen would roam the theatre district of Times Square venturing into magic shops and movie theatres. He spent hours listening to the radio and watching vaudeville acts in the Flatbush theatre. By the seventh grade Allen developed an astute knowledge of filmmaking and the ability to quote the acts of all the great comedians. Like Emerson's transparent eyeball, he absorbed everything he observed. By the time Allen enrolled in Midwood High School, love of comedy was very much instilled into the nature of his personality.

Allen, maintaining a negative attitude about formal education while a student at Midwood High, began sending jokes to newspaper columns under the pen name "Woody Allen". Upon his graduation he was writing jokes part-time for a public relations firm that needed good jokes for its clients. Less than a year after he sent his first joke to the columns, Allen flunked out of New York University and was hired by NBC to join their Writer's Development Program. Although he had
made his first successful career move, Woody Allen's tendency toward dissatisfaction would lead him to another change.

Allen's next career phase was important for three reasons: He began protecting his own material, he became interested in the arts and philosophy, and he met two influential agents, Jack Rollins and Charles H. Joffe. Rollins and Joffe were instrumental in transforming Allen into a stage performer because they recognized his extreme frustration in the misuse of his material by other comedians. The two frustrating, difficult years that followed forced Allen into a state of alienation and self-examination—a state that would later become a source for his philosophic ideology. It was also during these two years that he began reading literary classics ranging from Socrates to Fitzgerald. Ironically, he felt that he needed to be educated in order to feel comfortable with his peers. The comedian who finally emerged from this phase of his career was one concerned with man's existence: "I'm only interested in dealing with the top man, I'm not interested in dealing with the other stuff because that's not important.... But the only questions of real interest are the ultimate questions, otherwise who cares about anything else" (Lax 45)?

Not only did Allen's concern for the ultimate questions in life represent the origins of his Romantic thought, but it also foreshadowed major themes of his upcoming film career.

Allen's rise to the pinnacle of filmmaking began when Charles Feldman, upon hearing one of Woody Allen's stand-up
routines, commissioned him to write a screenplay, which would later become What's New, Pussy Cat? (1965). As in the past, Woody was dissatisfied with the way his work was misused and abused by those presenting his material to the public. Although the film was a tremendous success and Allen gained respect as a screenwriter, Feldman took considerable liberties with Allen's original screenplay. Allen's frustration once again prompted another career change, for he knew that in order to protect his work and achieve his goals he would have to become the writer and director of his own films. Lax claims that at the time Woody wanted "funny, artistic success," not commercial success (53). Woody Allen's quest for funny, artistic success began in 1966 and has involved twenty-three films. Of the twenty original screenplays Allen has written, nineteen have been directed by him and sixteen have involved him as an actor. His approach to filmmaking has yielded the success that he desired after the initial frustration with What's New, Pussy Cat?; it has also allowed him to deal with themes and questions involving his concern for man's purpose in the scheme of things. More importantly, his recent cinematic work has undergone a significant change with respect to these ultimate concerns.
Chapter Two

"...basically, He's an underachiever."
-Woody Allen

The 1975 release of Love and Death represents the full-scale emergence of Allen's Romantic concerns. The film, as the title implies, is a study of duality. As Woody says of his filmmaking, "The ideal thing is to be funny and also say something significant" (Dart 586). Allen's ideal concept is evident in Love and Death because the film not only marks the culmination of his first five films, dealing primarily with parody and satire, but it also represents the creation of the serious, existential attitudes that have dominated his work ever since. Douglas Brode suggests that the duality of comedy and significance in Love and Death represents more than a turning point in his film career; he believes it expresses an inner "tension between Woody, the entertainer, and Allen, the intellectual existentialist" (147).

The tension exists in the form of small jokes underscoring big issues. For example, Woody's character, Boris Grushenko, walks through the forest as a child contemplating the existence of Jesus Christ: "If he was a carpenter, I wonder what he charged for bookshelves." As
with this joke and others, Allen attempts to achieve his notion of the ideal film—funny and significant—by allowing humor to evolve from the most essential concerns of existence. Unfortunately, many of the jokes, whether humorous or not, interrupt the narrative and sometimes destroy the serious elements of the situation, which exist below the surface comedy. It has been suggested that this is a result of the existence of Allen's anti-hero, comic persona created in his earliest films. He allows himself the freedom to romp through the film quipping and commenting on almost everything. Unfortunately, audiences identify most often with the surface comedy, prompting Allen to remark sadly, "People don't connect with the seriousness of that picture because of the [comic] tone" (Brode 147). The lack of audience connection may be a result of the joke-filled narration, but a close viewing of the film reveals the seriousness of which Allen was so concerned.

_Love and Death_ is the story of Boris Grushenko, an early nineteenth-century Russian forced into military action against Napoleonic France. The setting and military involvement, backdrops to his life-long quest for the meaning of life, allow Allen in part to parody Russian literature. However, the importance of the film revolves around his desire for true love with his cousin Sonia (Diane Keaton) and his concern for some form of religious faith. Boris, forced to join the Russian army, becomes a war hero inadvertently
and marries Sonia upon his return from battle. After Boris
and Sonia fail an attempt to assassinate Napoleon, Boris is
executed for a crime "he never committed." Herein lies the
basic vehicle of the film. Boris exclaims in the opening
scene, "Isn't all mankind ultimately executed for a crime it
never committed?" Although Allen displays here a pessimistic
stance, he portrays Boris as a constant survivor throughout
the film. Not until his execution is Boris unable to
overcome obstacles; but, even his death suggests that he is
still triumphant. Allen appears to suggest that mankind must
constantly struggle toward an inevitable, unfair execution.
The film adapts the "success in failure" paradox in that
Boris, an obvious failure, finds success continually. Eric
Lax explains the underlying element of the Allen characters
in this manner (230):

In his (Allen's) work his characters are under
constant threat but always manage to triumph over
dire consequences and escape, if only into new
threats. Woody's fierce determination to achieve
survival both artistically and personally makes him
...terribly romantic.

The Lax description is Boris Grushenko; and the Romantic
artistry belongs to Love and Death.

Much like the Romantic poets of the nineteenth-century,
Woody Allen uses all the forms of his medium at his
discretion, and a conglomeration of styles is especially evident in *Love and Death*. The majority of the film is viewed by an omniscient camera, but the key to the film, and perhaps the most important technical aspect, is Boris Grushenko’s direct monologue. Allen allows the viewer inside the mind of Boris by the use of soliloquy and narration. The technique provides a more complete understanding of the main character and the thematic content of the film.

The most noticeable Romantic aspect of *Love and Death* exists in Allen’s use of spiritual and metaphysical cinematic methods. Boris Grushenko’s search for truth leads him often to the spiritual world for answers. In the beginning of the film, Boris speaks to the audience about two dreams which exemplify his life. The viewer is given the visual depiction of Boris hanging on the cross—symbolizing his ultimate crucifixion for a crime he did not commit. Boris also has conversations with people from beyond the grave who offer Boris insight into the reality of death. The most prominent spiritual display in the film is Boris’s frequent confrontations with the grim reaper, dressed ironically in white. Upon meeting the grim reaper as a young boy, Boris comes to the realization of an inevitable death:

*Grim Reaper:* You’re an interesting young man; we’ll meet again.

*Boris:* Don’t bother.

*Grim Reaper:* It’s no bother!

The comprehension of death sends Boris on a religious quest,
which culminates with a mystical experience from God.

Before he is executed, Boris has a conversation with an angel of the God, who promises that his life will be spared. Because the promise is not granted, the mystical message from the angel, which he desired throughout the film to instill a belief in God, represents a cynical view of the need for such experiences. In fact, the film suggests the inability of religion to supply the needed faith in Woody Allen's "evil, insidious, hostile universe" (Lax 32). Allen, admitting that Love and Death is very critical of God, states, "It implies that He doesn't exist, or if He does, He really can't be trusted" (Dart 585). An example of the film's distrust in God occurs following a large battle between the Russian and French forces. As Boris buries the dead, a priest exclaims, "Mercifully, God was on our side." Realizing that only fourteen men survived, Boris responds, "Yeah. I'm sure things could have gone a lot worse if He wasn't. It might have rained." The lack of trust in God is Allen's final response to the major theme of religion dealt with extensively in the film. Although the search for faith in God does not ultimately provide Boris with the answers for which he is searching, the mere existence of the search enables Woody Allen to exhaust the possibilities of religious faith. Allen says of religious inquiry (Dart 586):

I don't approve of any of the major religions because I feel organized religions are social,
political and economic organizations in general. But religious beliefs and religious faith—that does interest me and I have full appreciation for the search for genuine religious faith....

Regardless of his findings, Woody Allen does place an importance upon the quest for religious faith. Throughout the film, Boris is in constant pursuit for a sign from God. He wants to believe: "If I could see a miracle, just one miracle. If I could see a burning bush, or the seas part...." Later in the film, Boris becomes even more desperate: "If only God would give me some sign. If He would just speak to me once, anything, one sentence, two words. If He would just cough." It is clear that Boris yearns for religious belief. In a conversation with Sonia, Boris appears to claim that it is better to choose faith, instead of doubt, when there is no way of knowing whether or not God exists:

Boris: What if there is no God? What if we’re just bunch of absurd people who are running around with no rhyme or reason?

Sonia: But if there is no God, then life has no meaning. Why go on living? Why not just commit suicide?

Boris: Well, let’s not get hysterical! I could be wrong. I’d hate to blow my brains out and then read in the papers they found something.

This witty explanation is possibly the most optimistic statement in any film of Allen’s early career. Furthermore, Allen does not conclude the film by supporting a disbelief in
God; he simply finds more satisfying answers, such as love and his existential beliefs. Boris returns from the dead claiming he was "screwed" by the false promise given to him by the angel of the Lord. He then says of God in his final soliloquy, "If it turns out that there is a God, I don't think that he is evil. I think that the worst you can say about him is that, basically, He's an underachiever." The soliloquy allows Boris to dismiss the importance of his religious pursuit and support a belief in existentialism. It appears that Boris supports individual existence and freewill because religious faith will not provide the answers he seeks. Furthermore, he says that it is important "not to be bitter" about life and death; and, since God is an underachiever, a reliance upon one's self is the only way to avoid a bitter attitude toward an unfair world.

Although the religious theme is an important element in the film, one might conclude that the major emphasis in the film falls on the theme of love. Boris Grushenko's continued struggle to experience mutual love with his reluctant cousin Sonia dominates the film. In fact, Sonia agrees to marry Boris only if he survives a duel that she feels he is sure to lose. Boris survives and Sonia weeps on the marriage altar, "He missed, he missed." After overcoming many obstacles of marriage, Sonia finally falls in love with Boris; it is at this point that Boris, seized with a feeling of nothingness, contemplates and attempts suicide. He remarks after
conquering her love: "I feel a void at the center of my being." Boris, like all of Allen’s characters, is a survivor; but, in order to survive, physical, mental, moral, and emotional struggle must be a part of one’s life. When Sonia declares her love for him, Boris is no longer faced with a mystery for which to struggle. However, as he dangles from rope’s end, he is awakened to the realization that death is no end: "All I could think of was Sonia. I wanted to hold her close to me, weep tears on her shoulder, and engage in oral sex! It was then that I made the decision to live, to live and become a great poet." His new desires, however absurd, provide him with new obstacles of struggle that had abandoned his life. Boris and Sonia then embark in a mutual struggle which takes his life ultimately. Their failed attempt to assassinate Napoleon leads to his execution and God’s betrayal.

When Boris returns with the grim reaper and speaks with Sonia, his life-long struggle with love is rewarded and reaffirmed. She proclaims to him, "You were my one great love!" He responds bewildered, "Thank you." Although he understands the mysteries of life much better than when he was alive, he still does not, and possibly cannot, possess a significant understanding of the importance of love. This inability to gain a meaningful reaffirmation is most likely due to the fact that his life-long quest for Sonia’s love is dominated by his sexual desire.

In the film’s first sequence between the two characters,
Sonia explains to Boris her desire for a man that she could love both spiritually and sexually. She exclaims, "I guess you could say I'm half saint, half whore." Boris responds, "Just hoping I get the half that eats!" Following their marriage, Boris attempts to pursue a sexual experience with Sonia. In her denial of his advancement, she remarks, "Sex without love is an empty experience." Boris responds confidently, "Yes, but as empty experiences go, it's one of the best." As stated previously, one of his major reasons not to commit suicide was to "engage in oral sex!" In the scene Boris exclaims that all he could think of was Sonia, but it appears as though all he could think of was the "half that eats." Despite learning that he was Sonia's "one great love," his sexual attitudes still surface in his final soliloquy: "Regarding love...huh! You know...uh...what can you say? It's not the quantity of your sexual relations that counts. It's the quality. On the other hand, if the quantity drops below once every eight months, I would definitely look into it." As he did throughout his life, Boris once again appears to confuse sexual relations with spiritual love. Furthermore, his comments make a mockery of love. Boris laughs at the idea of love and appears at first to have no available explanations.

Despite the fact that Boris downplays love in his final soliloquy and realizes his religious quest was worthless, he still dances away joyfully with the grim reaper in the final
scene. Boris believes that he was betrayed by God and executed for a crime he never committed, yet he remains triumphant. The scene appears to suggest that nothing exists in life to combat the "evil, insidious, hostile" universe. Boris, unlike the two old ladies in the joke from Annie Hall, escapes the paradox of life and is no longer forced to eat only small portions of terrible meal.
Chapter Three

"I see a definite correlation between lack of popularity and high quality."

-Woody Allen

Woody Allen’s film career made a gigantic turn with *Annie Hall* in 1977. The anti-hero persona involved with parody, slapstick, and exotic settings was replaced by the intellectual, neurotic, Jewish, New Yorker. The emergence of this character creates the common assertion that most Allen films are auto-biographical. Allen often denies the assertion, but there is no doubt that he has turned inward and focused upon himself. Joan Didion, in reference to *Annie Hall* and two similar Allen films, claims "...the peculiar and hermetic self-regard in *Annie Hall*...would seem nothing with which large numbers of people would want to identify" (18). The most obvious evidence of this assertion, however, is in *Stardust Memories*, not *Annie Hall*. In *Stardust Memories*, Allen attacks his fans and critics by portraying them as grotesque and idiotic. He further says of the film: "It was my least popular film. That may automatically mean it was my best film.... I see a definite correlation between lack of popularity and high quality" (Shales 90). Allen’s "hermetic self-regard," and what appears to be contempt for the masses,
applies here with no argument. Pearl K. Bell, writing on
the subject of Allen's films, maintains that "he wants to
have it both ways: to make art films that mock art films, to
be intellectual and anti-intellectual, to show that Woody
Allen knows the score and can't be aced by anyone" (74).

The replacement of the anti-hero with the Jewish New
Yorker has affected Woody Allen's films in more ways than
simply an emergence of intellectual superiority. The most
notable, and important, difference is not in the thematic
concerns of the films, but in the Allen characters
themselves. Didion claims Allen's new characters are
"morose," possess "bad manners," and exhibit "superiority"
(18). While this may or may not be true, it is clear that
Allen's characters possess a feeling of emptiness, an
inability to form satisfying relationships, and a fear of
annihilation (Schapiro 47). They are extremely similar to
Boris Grushenko in several ways. However, the character's
self-awareness of these problems and fears creates the humor
that exists as the standard Woody Allen tone (48). Allen's
female characters are also much different from those of the
his earliest films. They have become interesting, complex,
characters and, in many instances, the central figures of
points out that "...Allen has become one of the cinema's
great directors of actresses (85). This statement is no
doubt debatable; but, beginning with Diane Keaton's Oscar-
winning performance in Annie Hall, Woody Allen's female
characters have enjoyed much importance in all of his films. Thus, the new Woody Allen persona and the emergence of the leading female character have changed the perspective of Allen’s work, making the difference in his filmmaking one of approach rather than one of substance.

The new Woody Allen characters, such as Alvy Singer in Annie Hall, Isaac Davis in Manhattan, Sandy Bates in Stardust Memories, and Danny Rose in Broadway Danny Rose, are all similar to Boris Grushenko in that they are concerned with intimate relationships and the meaning of their existence. The main difference is that these Allen characters possess a good understanding of love and life but still become victims of the universe. Boris Grushenko, on the other hand, is the anti-hero—an incompetent, cowardice smart aleck who survives all adversity and attains his desires. The characters mentioned above struggle through a life of self-examination and difficult relationships, but in the final analysis, become alienated. In fact, most of these characters are not even fortunate enough to learn anything from their disappointing endeavors. For example, Alvy Singer writes a play of his relationship with Annie Hall. Rather than writing of their true break-up, Alvy writes a happy ending where the two characters realize they love each other. He says to the camera in defense of the sentimental ending: "What do you want? It was my first play." It is clear that Alvy has learned little from his relationship and chooses to immortalize his fantasy life in the form of art.
Another difference between the characters of Allen’s recent films and those of his earliest films is the treatment of humor. Alvy Singer, Isaac Davis, Sandy Bates, and Danny Rose are all humorous and witty characters. In fact, each one is involved in some form of the entertainment business. The difference here is that these characters are less concerned with being funny. Boris Grushenko has a witty, smart aleck remark for everything and everyone; his comments on religion, women, intelligence, death, love, sex, and war make him the quintessential satirist of his time. As stated previously, Alvy Singer and Isaac Davis’s humor evolves from the awareness of their own personality through a serious self-examination. In many instances the comedy exists in the form of defense mechanisms to certain personality traits. In a scene from Annie Hall, for example, Woody responds to a snide remark about masturbation: "Don’t knock masturbation; it’s sex with someone I love." Of course, they are still accustomed to making smart remarks, but the humor exists on a more philosophical and psychological level than that of the anti-hero persona of Boris Grushenko.

The difference between the anti-hero and the neurotic, Jewish, New Yorker represents a slow evolution in Allen’s work. Consequently, Allen’s humor in films like Manhattan and Broadway Danny Rose becomes more and more subtle and sparse than the joke-filled narrative of Love and Death. Woody Allen’s more subtle, psychological humor, combined with the serious self-examinations of all his characters,
dominates his films between 1977 and the mid-1980’s. This new approach to filmmaking, as well as comedy, allows Woody Allen the opportunity to study existential themes in the modern world, which, for Allen, is the upper-class, Jewish, intellectual residing in Manhattan. It is no wonder that critics such as Didion find astonishment in the success of Allen’s films. While Didion is insulted by the intellectual superiority of Allen’s films, Bell, equally insulted, cites this aspect as one reason Allen is a success, or more precisely, a "cultural phenomenon" (73):

Woody Allen has created a new kind of Jewish comedian who is not only smart and sassy but erudite as well. His wisecracks are festooned with names and titles covering a vast range of intellectual reference, from Socrates to Kafka, like the college reading-list for Humanities 101. For the millions in the audience who consider themselves part of the "culturati," Allen’s gags, crackling with literary know-how, dispense the balm of self-esteem. And the jokes are no mere laughing matter, but profound reflections on the foibles and hang-ups of our time. This comic must be a "khukkem," the wise man of old.

Between 1977 and 1985 Woody Allen created eight films, each of them different, humorous, and an experiment in form and subject matter; however, the humor of each film is precisely as Bell claims—"no mere laughing matter."
The reaction to Woody Allen's 1986 release of *Hannah and Her Sisters* suggests that Allen not only discovered an effective balance between comedy and drama, but also created a film that redefines his themes and culminates his previous attempts. Hailed by many critics as a masterpiece and categorized as a piece of literature (the screenplay is located in most libraries), *Hannah and Her Sisters* provides the viewer, the critic, and the scholar with a fresh approach to some of Allen's oldest themes that embody his special vision.
Chapter Four

"The heart is a very, very resilient little muscle."
-Woody Allen

Hannah and Her Sisters, like Love and Death, represents a duality in Woody Allen's cinematic art. The film appears to be a culmination of his work by its balancing of old and new Allen characteristics. The film displays an obsession with death, a concern for religion, a quest for love, a fetish for New York, and the satisfying need for art (Brode 256). The characters are successful, intellectual, humorous, and passionate, but, to some extent, are also victims of the universe. Allen's own character, Mickey Sachs, represents the neurotic, Jewish, intellectual of his most recent films, but the anti-hero, comic persona emerges from time to time. Most importantly, Allen's pursuit of comedy and drama reaches its highest level of fluidity, in that elements of humor do not disrupt the dramatic narrative. David Ansen comments in his review of the film: "...Allen...restores glamour and substance...counterpointing hilarity and pathos with almost faultless tact" (67). Ansen's conclusion is true of most of the film because Woody reminds the viewer that many pitiful situations are a result, or the cause, of some humorous
moment.

A second examination of Hannah leads to an awareness that the film is not a culmination of his film career; rather, it is simply a subtle turning point in style and attitude. Hannah and Her Sisters, representing the largest cast of any Allen film, marks the beginning of his successful use of an ensemble in that Allen's large canvas interweaves and relates a variety of sub-plots into one story (Sinyard 82). Ansen applauds Allen's approach: "He juggles these overlapping stories with novelistic finesse" (67). It is worth noting that Pauline Kael, a constant Allen critic, has referred to the film as "an agreeably skillful movie."

Kael's remark represents as much a break from the past as Allen's film. Favorable reviews coincide with the film's public approval as a box-office success, which prompted Allen once again to discuss the relationship between high quality and popularity (Brode 256):

If you make a popular movie, you start to think, where have I failed? I must be doing something that's unchallenging, or reinforcing prejudices of the middle class or being simplistic or sentimental.

Simplistic is definitely the wrong adjective here, but sentimental may apply. The film ends on the most optimistic note of any Allen project.

The argument that the film represents a change in style
is supported by the fact that, since the release of *Hannah*, three of Allen's four feature-length films have been ensembles. Another apparent change is Allen's use of himself as a character. In the film Allen plays the role of a supporting character rather than the standard leading man—a technique witnessed once again in the recent release of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Perhaps the most important change that can be seen in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, as well as in his recent films, is a move toward a sense of optimism. This element more than any other suggests that *Hannah and Her Sisters* represents a major turning point in Woody Allen's filmmaking because it appears that he has finally found some possible answers to the mysteries of life.

Woody Allen's large ensemble production is billed as the story of three New York sisters, Hannah, Holly, and Lee, and the men who revolve in and out of their lives. The main plot of the film concerns itself with an illicit love affair between Lee (Barbara Hershey) and Hannah's husband, Elliot (Michael Caine). A thorough viewing of the film, however, reveals that the story is really about Mickey Sachs, a neurotic, yet successful, television producer, and his relationships with two of the sisters, Hannah (Mia Farrow) and Holly (Dianne Wiest). Mickey, once married to Hannah, falls in love and marries Holly by the end of the film. The essential development is that Allen moves from despair—a suffocating, unsuccessful marriage to Hannah—to complete
happiness—an ironic, surprising marriage to Holly. What is no less surprising, at least for the characters involved, is the compelling, yet humorous, love affair between Elliot and Lee. Allen's interweaving tale provides an intriguing and complex examination of modern love.

The importance of love is a theme not new to Woody Allen, and in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Allen once again focuses on the characters' ability to understand this importance. In the film love is displayed as a source of chaos and disorder; and, the love affair between Lee and Elliot, liberating Lee and reaffirming Elliot's marriage, is one example of the way some human beings actually survive one of these chaotic situations. The film suggests that Woody Allen is abandoning the existential concept that humans are in total control of their lives. Both Elliot and Lee attempt to control their existence in an immoral manner, only to witness their lives become enriched by romantic and spiritual love rather than sexual desire. Elliot is suffocated by Hannah's perfection; Lee, living with an isolated, eccentric artist named Frederick (Max Von Sydow), is suffocated by her lover's possessive, protective nature (Brode 260). Thus, both Elliot and Lee believe that sexual fantasy is the only escape, especially in Elliot's case.

In the film's opening scene it is clear that Elliot is attracted to Lee. He says to himself that he is "consumed by her" presence. Although he claims he loves her, his obvious
sexual attraction leaves this possibility indeterminate. His own confusion dominates his mind as he lies in bed with Hannah following his first sexual encounter with Lee:

What passion today with Lee. She’s a volcano. It was a totally fulfilling experience...Just as I dreamed it would be. That’s what it was. It was like living out a dream...a great dream. Now I feel very good and cozy being here next to Hannah. ...She’s a wonderful woman, and I betrayed her. She came into my empty life and changed it...and I paid her back by banging her sister in a hotel room. God, I’m despicable.

Although Elliot only appears to be suffering from the immediate guilt of an adulterous act, his emotions toward Hannah are sincere. Within this brief moment, Elliot is aware of his true feelings. He captures his fantasy life and, as a result, understands the importance of his relationship with Hannah; however, in a film where individuals lack the power to control their lives, Woody Allen creates a chaotic situation immediately.

While Elliot decides to call Lee and break off the affair, Lee is escaping her suffocating life by confessing her experience to Frederick:

Lee: I have to move out!

Frederick: You are my only connection to the world!
Lee: Oh, God, that's too much responsibility for me. It's not fair! ...(What do you get out of me, anyway? I mean... it's not sexual anymore. It's certainly not intellectual... you're so superior to me in every way....

Allen's intermingling of comedy and drama is witnessed in this episode. The scene between Lee and Frederick is powerfully dramatic and authentic. Following Lee's confession, Allen juxtaposes a humorous moment, which arises as a result of the dramatic confrontation between Lee and Frederick. As Elliot reaches for the telephone to call Lee and break off the affair, the phone rings loudly. Elliot stands motionless as Lee's voice pierces through the receiver: "I feel very close to you tonight...very, very, close. Good night." Elliot is unable to break off the affair; his guilty conscience is dismantled by the excitement of new love. Writing in Film Comment, Richard Zoglin concludes that the scene is "a nice moment that indicates the folly of trying to be master of one's own heart" (20).

Zoglin's observation is precisely correct because Woody Allen exhausts this premise—intellectual mastery of the heart—throughout the film, so much so that Elliot is lured into believing he loves Lee, and Lee discovers she really doesn't love Elliot. Her ability to break away from Frederick gives her the confidence to end the affair with Elliot when she falls in love with one of her college professors. The irony of Elliot's continued involvement with Lee is that he becomes aware of his true emotions on several
occasions, but is unable to end the affair. He says to himself in disgust: "For all my education, accomplishments, and so-called wisdom...I can't fathom my own heart." Yet, Elliot continues throughout the film to try to be the "master of his own heart," but not until Lee ends the affair does Elliot finally succumb to the reality that he loves Hannah. He is then able to explain to Hannah why she is so suffocating, and the mutual realization of this aspect sends their relationship on a revived journey—a journey Elliot never dreamed he would encounter.

The affair between Lee and Elliot dominates much of the film, but Allen's interweaving sub-plot of Mickey Sachs possesses the essential themes comparable to those seen in Love and Death. It has been suggested that Woody Allen's "evil, insidious, hostile universe" exists in Hannah and Her Sisters in the form of chaotic situations and complete disorder. The life of Mickey Sachs represents this aspect completely. Before falling in love with Holly, Mickey's life is the epitome of disorder. Much like Boris Grushenko in Love and Death, Mickey is on a quest to discover a sense of hope in a meaningless world. The difference here is that Mickey is a hypochondriac who worries constantly about his health; the episodes in the film display Mickey's fears of a possible brain tumor. Furthermore, his marriage with Hannah is ruined by his inability to have children, and he abandons his successful career out of frustration with writers,
sponsors, and critics. Unlike Boris Grushenko, Mickey is forced on a spiritual quest by the pressures of existing in a modern world; he is not concerned with the ultimate question of life—whether or not God exists—until the chaos of his life reaches a point of utter bewilderment.

As he does in almost all his films, Allen displays life as a paradox. Mickey Sachs experiences a hearing loss in one ear and believes he may have a brain tumor. After weeks of living in terror, he learns he has absolutely nothing wrong with him. It is at this point that Mickey abandons his career and begins his spiritual quest. He says to an employee or his production staff: "Do you realize what a thread we're all hanging by? ...I mean, you're gonna die, I'm gonna die, the audience is gonna die, the network's gonna—The sponsor. Everything! ...I can't stay on this show. I gotta get some answers." The paradox here is that not having the brain tumor violates the principles of his life (Burkhart 295). He leaves the hospital dancing and jumping joyfully, only to stop suddenly to realize that his life is wrong. Mickey loses the only order of his chaotic life—the ability to imagine that he possesses a dire illness or disease. In essence, Mickey's only order in life is in the form of disorder. Confused by his healthy condition, Mickey forces himself to become concerned with his eventual death, which, in turn, sends him on a quest for "answers."

As stated previously, Mickey is not consumed with the notion of religion. Accordingly, the episode inaugurating
his quest for answers begins not with religion, but with intellectual knowledge and is subtitled by an appropriate quote from Tolstoy—"the only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless." Mickey, shown leaving a huge university library, walks aimlessly and ruminates:

Millions of books on every conceivable subject by all these great minds, and, in the end, none of 'em knows anything more about he big questions of life than I do. I read Socrates. You know, this guy used to knock off little Greek boys. What the hell's he got to teach me? And Nietzsche with his Theory of Eternal Recurrence. He said that the life we live, we're gonna live over and over again the exact same way for eternity. Great. That means I'll have to sit through the Ice Capades again. It's not worth it.

This may be the finest example of Woody Allen dismissing intellectual theories of life, and it is clear evidence of Pearl Bell's earlier assertion that Woody Allen "knows the score and can't be aced by anyone" (74). Allen, displaying intellectual and anti-intellectual traits simultaneously, exhibits his knowledge of the great scholars only to dismiss their credibility. Although Woody Allen displays a highbrow attitude, the importance of the scene remains intact—Mickey is beginning to become more and more depressed with the possibilities of understanding his existence.
Mickey’s desperation increases as he continues to contemplate his situation. Surrendering all hope, Mickey reminds himself of the existence of love; however, this recollection leads to even more despair. He continues his assault on the "great minds" as several joggers pass him:

...and Freud, another great pessimist. Jeez, I was in analysis for years. Nothing happened. My poor analyst got so frustrated. The guy finally put in a salad bar. Oh! Look at all these people jogging...trying to stave off the inevitable decay of the body. ...Oh! Look at this one! (An extremely fat, woman jogger passes) Poor thing. My God, she has to tote all that fat around. She should pull it on a dolly. Maybe the poets are right. Maybe love is the only answer.

Following his acknowledgment of love, Mickey remembers his failed marriage to Hannah and his first date with Holly, a disastrous fiasco depicted in a flashback sequence. Because Mickey equates love with two unfulfilling experiences, love becomes yet another disorganized element in his already meaningless life.

Within this small voice-over segment Allen practically runs the gamut of his cinematic concerns and techniques. Mickey contemplates intellectual theories, displays a good sense of humor, makes smart remarks, reveals a sense of pessimism, and acknowledges the importance of love. Because
of the diverse nature of this narration and the ensuing flashback of Mickey and Holly’s disastrous first encounter, the entire episode acts as a fulcrum to Mickey’s story. Intellect and love, two important elements in society, are worthless to Mickey Sachs; he becomes a desperate man, and so religion becomes his final possibility.

Allen rejoins Mickey’s story later in the film in a segment entitled, "The big leap," where Mickey attempts to convert to Catholicism. The opening scene involves Mickey and a priest discussing the reasons for Mickey’s interest in the religion. The episode has been criticized highly by critics, such as Tom O’Brien in Commonweal, who objects to Allen’s anti-religious stance and the "cold," unsympathetic view of the priest and Catholicism (151), and Richard Zoglin, who writes that Mickey’s "spiritual crisis...is facile and unconvincing" (20). O’Brien’s objection seems most inappropriate because Woody Allen displays no more of an anti-religious stance in Hannah and Her Sisters than he does in any of his other films. Furthermore, it is clear that Allen attacks only organized religion, not religion as it pertains to individual beliefs and pursuits. This fact is well established by Allen’s earlier comments concerning Love and Death, wherein he states that he has "full appreciation for the search for genuine religious faith" (Dart 586). In the episode the priest says to Mickey, "So at the moment you don’t believe in God." Mickey responds in classic Woody Allen humor, "No. And I want to. You know, I’m willing to
do anything. I'll, you know, I'll dye Easter eggs if it works." Although Allen underscores a big issue with a silly comment, the joke still says much about the modern misconceptions and complete commercialization of religion. However, it is this type of comment that leads critics such as Zoglin to view Mickey's spiritual quest as "unconvincing" and sophomoric.

On the surface Mickey's conversion to Catholicism does appear ridiculous. In response to the priest's inquiry on why Mickey chooses Catholicism to find the meaning in life, Mickey responds, "Well, you know...first of all, because it's a very beautiful religion. It's very well structured."

Mickey is no doubt a poor candidate for conversion, but one must remember that the possibilities in his life seem limited. Mickey does not ask himself the question—why choose Catholicism? He finds no reason not to choose Catholicism. If the priest understands this element in Mickey, then it is incorrect to accuse Allen of portraying him negatively, or "cold," as O'Brien insists. Marian Burkhart believes that the priest "is merely bemused, as any...(priest)...with a lick of sense would be if he were confronted by so unlikely a convert as Mickey" (295). Furthermore, she insists that the priest suggests Catholic literature to Mickey "despairingly, for he recognizes that Mickey is not one whom reasoned argument can reach" (295). Regardless of which interpretation one chooses to believe, the simple truth is that Mickey and Catholicism just do not
Mickey's search for faith is very similar to Boris Grushenko's. Burkhart asserts that "Mickey is seeking not faith—an intellectual virtue—but an existential event that will shock him out of despair and destroy it forever" (295). His situation is parallel to Boris's desire to see a miracle. Mickey's frustration with the lack of miracles found in Catholicism leads him even further to find some form of religion that will provide the shock he seeks. Thus, Mickey next confronts Hare Krishnas in Central Park. "What's your religion," asks the Krishna leader. Mickey responds, "Well, I was born Jewish, but last winter I tried to become a Catholic.... Catholicism for me was die now, pay later, you know." Mickey's response indicates his frustration with the lack of an immediate shock of enlightenment in religion, and he walks away with Hare Krishna literature but rejects the faith immediately: "Who are you kidding? You're gonna be a Krishna? You're gonna shave your head and put on robes and dance around at airports? You'll look like Jerry Lewis. Oh, God, I'm so depressed." Not only is Mickey unable to possess a serious, long-term faith, but he is also unwilling to accept the responsibilities of a particular religious organization. Therefore, Allen’s anti-religious stance is not as absolute as O'Brien claims because Mickey is a
confused individual, not really searching for the long-term faith that religion can offer and that Woody Allen knows exists.

It is true that Boris Grushenko and Mickey Sachs share similarities in their religious quests, regardless of their motivations. However, Mickey and Boris are not identical characters. Mickey is a more realistic character concerned with his life, as opposed to Boris, the Romantic existentialist concerned with all life. Allen creates more believable reasons for Mickey to be concerned with the existence of mankind. Furthermore, Mickey abandons his pursuit willingly after discovering no answers; Boris is tricked into believing in an all-powerful God, only to conclude that God is an "underachiever." Allen's treatment of religion is much less critical in Mickey's case. Finally, while Boris's sense of free will leads to his eventual death, Mickey never experiences the existential shock he needs to rid his life of despair. Although he ends his religious quest with no answers, Mickey benefits from an element of what may be interpreted as determinism—a concept, when compared with Romanticism, exists at the other end of the spectrum.

Although Boris and Mickey are motivated differently, their unfulfilling spiritual quests conclude with the same result—a failed suicide attempt. Boris, hanging at rope's end, decides that he wants to live; Mickey, holding a rifle to his head, benefits from a stroke of determinism.
Contemplating the existence of God, Mickey pulls the trigger inadvertently; however, he is perspiring so much that the gun slides off his forehead and shoots a hole through the wall. Who else but Woody Allen, right? Startled and delirious, Mickey flees his apartment and winds up in a movie theatre, where he sees the old Marx Brother’s film, *Duck Soup*. While watching this film, Mickey discovers the reason for living. Marian Burkhart summarizes the essential meaning of the film, as it relates to Mickey’s condition (296):

Mickey makes use not of a great movie, but of a rather silly early musical to achieve his epiphany, for it is an epiphany of the ordinary, of the joy there is in human life—against all odds.

It appears that Allen is accepting more ordinary reasons to have faith in life. The simplicity and raw comedy of the film reveal to Mickey that life is enjoyable, at least to the point of not committing suicide. Mickey says of the experience later in the film: "I should stop ruining my life searching for answers I’m never gonna get, and just enjoy it (life) while it lasts." Although Mickey believes he is abandoning the struggle of searching for the answers to the meaning of life, he is entering another form of struggle—existing against all odds.

Existing against the odds represents Mickey’s paradoxical state of existence, which is identical to Boris Grushenko’s, in that both characters need to experience a
life of struggle that they believe will never cease. If Mickey were to discover the "answers," then his life would become too ordered and he would no longer exist "against the odds." This loss of disorder occurs twice in Mickey's life—when he learns he is infertile and when he learns he doesn't have a brain tumor. In both cases Mickey's life goes awry. However, while watching Duck Soup, Mickey realizes that the ordinary joy found in human life is far greater than possessing the "answers" to life's mysterious questions. Mickey's accidental viewing of Duck Soup leads him down a path he would never have taken.

Mickey's unexplainable, surprising marriage to Holly has been cited as evidence of an optimistic Woody Allen. Although he is annoyed by many aspects of the film, Richard Zoglin calls the ending of the film Allen's "final masterstroke" (20). Douglas Brode insists that Allen has passed "from Romanticism to realism," thus "transforming from an artist of great potential into a mature filmmaker" (263). While it is true that Allen may be bridging the gap between Romanticism and realism, he has not yet crossed the bridge and abandoned Romantic concerns. The maturity in Allen's filmmaking is not in a disregard of Romanticism, but in the precise control of a dramatic surprise. Although Mickey tries desperately to control his own life, he falls in love with Holly—a woman he thought he disliked. The dramatic success of the film's end is created by Mickey's earlier
flashback of his first date with Holly—a total disaster that is easily one of the funniest moments in the entire film.

The disorder of Mickey's life is emphasized throughout the episode by contrasting moods in each scene. As Mickey stands in solitude thinking about love, he remembers the evening. Allen then cuts the film abruptly to a smoke-filled rock club, where Mickey and Holly are engulfed in loud music. The differences in their personalities become obvious immediately:

Mickey: I, I, my ears are experiencing a meltdown! I can't hear anything.

Holly: Look, can't you feel the energy? It's tangible energy! The room's alive with positive vibrations! (She opens a vial of cocaine)

Mickey: Holly, I'm frightened! I'm-- After they sing they're gonna take hostages! (Holly holds a short metal straw of cocaine to her nose and sniffs it) Don't, no, please. Will you? No, don't...

The two are as incompatible as any two individuals could possibly be. In an argument outside the rock club, Holly complains, "...you don't believe in ESP, you don't like rock music, you won't get high. It's like I'm dating Cardinal Cooke!" At this point Allen once again employs the use of an abrupt cut. Mickey and Holly sit in an Art Deco club surrounded by an elderly crowd listening to Bobby Short. The juxtaposition of settings allows Allen to display the disorder of Mickey's life visually.

Following the scene in the Art Deco lounge, where nothing is said between Mickey and Holly, the film cuts to
the exterior of the club. Mickey and Holly are once again in an argument, only this time they are somewhat vicious:

Holly: I was so bored!

Mickey: (rather sarcastically)...I'm glad Hannah got us together. You know, she's got a great instinct for people. Really.

Holly: God!

Mickey: I had a great time tonight, really. It was like the Nuremberg Trials.

Holly then leaves in a taxi as Mickey walks alone down the street. At this point it is obvious that Mickey has also abandoned love as a possible reason to find hope in his meaningless life. He says to himself of the terrible experience, "...too bad, too...because, you know, I always had a little crush on her." Mickey's comment is fitting because everything he desires is somehow ruined, and the entire flashback is just one example of Mickey trying to control his own fate, only to see his life go astray.

Mickey's inability to control his life becomes an ultimate stroke of luck because his failed suicide attempt and his accidental epiphany lead to his unlikely marriage to Holly. The two reunite and somehow find pleasure in each other. Perhaps it is due to the fact that Mickey is much less uptight and can now carry out his "little crush" on Holly with no hostility. Perhaps it is because Holly is much more cultured; she is now attempting to write plays, and, when they first meet again, Holly is browsing through the
jazz section in a record store. The scene in the record store is a far cry from the angry, disordered scenes of their first date. Holly proclaims, "I think it's lucky I ran into you. Maybe." Her comment epitomizes the entire focus of the film: The fact that there's really no way of knowing how one's life will turn out. Recalling Mickey's comments concerning his epiphany, he says, "Maybe there is something (beyond life). Nobody really knows. I know, I know, 'maybe' is a very slim reed to hang your whole life on, but that's the best we have." Ironically, Holly hangs their relationship on the same principle—"maybe." However, this small element of doubt is what enables Mickey to pursue the relationship with vigor.

Woody Allen characters, such as Boris Grushenko, Alvy Singer, Isaac Davis, and Danny Rose, all realize that love is the only answer, but each one is unable to conquer the difficulties of love and enjoy its power and fulfillment. Mickey Sachs becomes the exception. In the film's final episode Mickey embraces Holly and remarks about his strange circumstance: "I used to always have Thanksgiving dinner with Hannah, and I never thought that I could love anybody else. And here it is, years later, and I'm married to you and completely in love with you. The heart is a very, very resilient little muscle." Woody Allen at last creates a character whose heart is resilient and, better yet, whose mind is aware of this fact. Allen's resiliency, however, does not end with the enlightenment of the heart. As the
film ends, Holly whispers into Mickey's ear, "I'm pregnant."

Prior to this moment, the Woody Allen character of all his films was one who found little meaning in life. Mickey Sachs stands alone as the Allen character who not only finds faith in life, but also finally creates life--his development is one of total surprise.

The ending of the film remains slightly ambiguous. After trying valiantly to control his own destiny and take responsibility for his own actions, Mickey Sachs discovers happiness and faith en passant. Here Woody Allen appears to abandon his existential themes completely. However, the optimistic ending occurs only after Allen exhausts all possibilities of creating a cruel, meaningless world in which Mickey exists aimlessly. Therefore, has Allen led the viewer to believe that Mickey will continue to live happily with Holly? Her whisper, "I'm pregnant," may be one in series of concrete realities that send Mickey's life into turmoil. The reader should recall that Mickey's life embarked on a quest for "answers" only after he realized everything in his life was perfectly normal. Accordingly, the end of the film may only be the rebirth of Mickey's problems.

Woody Allen's change of heart is not without criticism. Although most film critics are pleased with the overall technical and dramatic elements, each segment of the <i>Hannah and Her Sisters</i> is criticized for a variety of different reasons; the ending of the film is no different. Pearl
Bell's critical summary of the film may be the most simplistic and straightforward response of any; she writes in *Cinema* (75):

> It is hard to grasp just what Allen was trying to work out in this movie, a series of truncated sketches slouching toward a sentimental ending. There's little bite to the dialogue, little substance to the characters; and since it takes a certain talent to produce affectless vapidity, Hannah was hailed as Woody Allen's masterpiece.

It should be noted that Bell is the same critic who is insulted by Allen's pretentious character. She is more accurate in her criticism of the sentimental ending. Sentimentalism appears to be the focus of attack by many critics and scholars, such as Neil Sinyard, whose study of the film concludes that it is "soft-centered and sentimental beneath its sophistication and subtlety" (87). Richard Zoglin concludes that the ending of the film is "further evidence that Allen has matured even more as an artist...or...has finally figured out how to please just about everybody" (20). Woody's own comments, questioning the film's degree of simplicity and sentimentalism, would lead one to believe that he has known all along how to please everybody, and by accident created *Hannah and Her Sisters*. However, maybe it's lucky he did—maybe?
Conclusion

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter;"
-Keats

The comparison between Love and Death and Hannah and Her Sisters displays a shift within Woody Allen’s Romantic concerns of existentialism, not a complete shift toward the fundamental characteristics of realism. Allen’s cinematic development is most characterized by the emergence of optimism within his Romantic framework, especially with respect to the quest for the ideal love and the folly of mastering the human heart. In Hannah and Her Sisters Mickey Sachs becomes the pioneer of a more optimistic, and less existential, representation of the quest for the ideal love. In several ways, however, Mickey also serves as a reminder of the essential characteristics of the Romantic protagonist—an existential character in constant search of a seemingly unattainable ideal, which, if discovered, is not as great as imagined.

The concept involving Allen’s Romantic protagonist recalls the words of John Keats: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter" (Brode 31). What Keats may
have failed to acknowledge, however, is the importance of the struggle to obtain the unheard melody, or the ideal melody. Although Allen's protagonist finds disappointment in his ideals, he becomes motivated to pursue other ideals, which are usually greater than the first. The Romantic protagonist, representing the "success in failure" paradox, discovers fulfillment in the constant striving toward an ideal beyond his understanding. In other words, the result of the quest appears to be a failure, but the quest itself represents a reward—a revelation of the commitment to the human heart. Perhaps this revelation explains the joke at the beginning of Annie Hall, where Alvy Singer says of the two old ladies disappointed with small portions of a terrible meal, "Well, that's essentially how I feel about life—full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly." Within this paradoxical state of existence, the heart has to be a "resilient little muscle."
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