

## **Dead Men Do Tell Tales: The Existential Significance of the Dead in *Four Sheets to the Wind***

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For most people, death is no laughing matter. Rather, thought of it inspires dread. The existential philosopher Martin Heidegger asserts as much, maintaining that even ordinary human anxieties are grounded in our fear of death, a fear that most people attempt to elude by engaging in evasive behaviors, behaviors he refers to as “inauthentic” modes of being (40). According to Heidegger, most individuals avoid thinking about death by keeping themselves busy. They distract themselves with activity and thereby avoid reflecting upon their mortality. Arguably, like other forms of entertainment, movies offer individuals an escape from both thought about death and the deadening monotony of everyday life; however, as Heidegger makes clear, despite our efforts at denial, death cannot be eluded, even in our favorite hiding places. Indeed, death greets us even in film, figuring prominently in many cinematic plots. This is true of Sterlin Harjo’s, *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007). Like two other recent films, namely, *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), *Four Sheets to the Wind* foregrounds death in an overt fashion through the comedic presence of a corpse in the film. This essay considers the existential significance of these grim figures.

Though it is more a story about life than death, *Four Sheets to the Wind* opens with the main character, Cufe Smallhill, dragging a corpse down a dirt road in rural Oklahoma. As the narrator recounts a story of rabbit who eats a bear, Cufe hauls the body along the road and then through a field. The scene concludes with Cufe submersing the corpse in a secluded farm pond. Though the opening scene arouses grave suspicions regarding the circumstances surrounding the death of the figure, audiences quickly learn that instead of hiding evidence of a homicide, Cufe is fulfilling the last wishes of his father, Frank Smallhill, whose body Cufe discovered after he had committed suicide.

Though Cufe deposits his father’s body in the pond just moments into the film, he keeps this fact secret from everyone except his family members so that a traditional funeral service can take place. Though funerals are normally somber events, Frank Smallhill thought they were nothing but a “big circus,” and Harjo introduces much of the humor in *Four Sheets to the Wind* in the scenes related to the funeral. The scenes that depict the deceptions Cufe and his cousin, Jim, engage in to dupe the funeral home into believing they have a body are particularly amusing. For example, in order to make the garishly painted casket approximate the weight of Cufe’s father, the young men purchase watermelons by the side of the road and fill the casket with them. They even draw a face on the one at the head of the casket. Then, to preclude the funeral home attendant from discovering their ruse, Jim soberly (and ironically) invokes the sacredness of “traditional ways” that prohibit non-natives from viewing the body.

Rather than open with the figure of a corpse, *Little Miss Sunshine* introduces one midstream when a prominent character dies. As those familiar with the film know, *Little Miss Sunshine* focuses on the dysfunctional Hoover family and their comic struggle to deliver their youngest member, Olive (Abigail Breslin), to Redondo Beach, California to participate in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant. Sadly, rather than witness the chaos that follows from his granddaughter performing her unconventional talent for a girl's beauty pageant, namely a striptease to the music of Rick James' *Superfreak*, Oliver's grandfather, Edwin Hoover (Alan Arkin), dies unexpectedly en route to the pageant as a result of a heroin overdose. Rather than leave his father's body in the care of strangers at the hospital morgue, Olive's dad Richard Hoover (Greg Kinnear) elects to violate hospital policy (and state law) and "steal" the corpse. *Sunshine* proves itself a black comedy as Edwin's body is pushed forcibly out a window, trotted through the parking lot, and stuffed into the back of the family's dilapidated VW bus, now a makeshift hearse. Even more humorous is the fact that the family now has to push-start the bus in order to continue their trip. The humor is heightened further when Richard, increasingly anxious that he won't get Olive to the pageant or himself to an important meeting, is pulled over on the interstate because the VW's horn is stuck and blaring. Tension builds when the trooper asks Richard to open the back. Hysterically, rather than discover the corpse that is literally under his nose, the trooper instead unearths Olive's Uncle Frank's (Steve Carell) copy of *Buns*, a pornographic magazine Edwin had been kind enough to give Frank the money to purchase at one of their recent pit stops.

As the title suggests, a corpse plays an even more central role in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*. Where the death of the father catalyzes the maturation of the son in both *Four Sheets to the Wind* and *Little Miss Sunshine*, in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, the figure of the corpse functions differently and has an even more prominent role. Indeed, the corpse of Melquiades Estrada (Julio Cedillo) effectively plays sidekick to the main character, rancher Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones) throughout the film. Though all three films foreground journeys, in *Three Burials* the journey is to justice, rather than maturity or personal growth. *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* traces Pete's journey after he discovers that his long-time friend, Melquiades Estrada, has been killed. After learning of Melquiades' wrongful death, Pete feels bound not only to fulfill the last wishes of his friend to be buried in his home-town of Jimenez, Mexico, but also to bring his killer, Texas patrolman, Mike Norton (Barry Pepper) to justice. Though Pete is committed to his objectives and the film has a serious racial message, Melquiades' corpse is used consistently for comic effect. Pete literally carries Melquiades' body to Mexico. Like an Irish wake on holiday, Pete talks to Melquiades throughout the trip while simultaneously trying to keep his friend together (pieces fall off) and the stink down.

What links these three films is their emphasis on a corpse and their use of that corpse for comic effect. From an existential perspective, it is surprising to see death foregrounded in this fashion. Specifically, it is surprising to have corpses used for comic relief because according to Heidegger, death is what humans fear more than anything else. Heidegger states that the slightest thought of death causes profound anxiety or "angst"(232). He argues that the anxiety that awareness of death arouses is so unsettling,

so disconcerting, that individuals immediately seek to distance themselves (both physically and psychically) from anything that whispers of their mortality. Thus, he asserts that our “everyday” mode of being toward death is denial (Heidegger 233). To the extent that he believes individuals have a visceral sense of their mortality, Heidegger does not even think that most individuals formally confront death before engaging in denial. Rather, he states that while people acknowledge the general fact that death is an “undeniable fact of experience”(237), “people initially and for the most part do not know about [their own] death...[instead they] fle[e] from it...[and] cove[r] over [their] own most being-toward-death”(233). In addition, he asserts that the “evasion of death ... dominates” and is perpetuated by mainstream culture (234). An example of this is the way that we are encouraged to put death out of our midst by marginalizing those who are dying. Likewise, we are discouraged from engaging in thought about death or discussion of it with others. Because of various social conventions that prohibit direct recognition of death, individuals who discuss their mortality are characterized morbid and abnormal, and such negative characterizations serve as an additional deterrent. Ultimately, rather than be encouraged to confront mortality, we are instead indoctrinated to engage in activities that achieve the goal of “constant tranquillization about death”(Heidegger 235). These efforts are so pervasive that death itself “is [increasingly] seen as a social inconvenience, if not a downright tactlessness, from which [the public] should be spared”(235).

Of course, Heidegger does not think individuals should be spared thought of death. Rather, he asserts that we need to take on our dying in order to live authentically and achieve our potential both personally and interpersonally. According to Heidegger, death is not something that happens to us. It is something we are. From the minute we are born, we “are always already dying”(Heidegger 235). When we deny our mortality, we deny ourselves. This denial has serious consequences. First, though it seeks to assuage anxiety, it never fully accomplishes this goal. According to Heidegger, the awareness we have of death is primarily visceral, not cognitive. As such, this visceral awareness cannot be eradicated. For example, though individuals can suppress thought of death from their mind, they cannot suppress the visceral rush that follows a near collision and powerfully restores their awareness of their mortality. Indeed, it is because awareness of death cannot be eradicated that people’s efforts at denial are constant and often display a certain fervor or necessity. To the extent death is an inescapable fact the denial of it merely leaves individuals dimly anxious about, desperately trying to suppress, and ill-prepared for, its inevitable appearance.

Another negative consequence of the denial of death is that it “estranges” us from our own being and from others (Heidegger 235). Because denial of death precludes discussion of that which defines our being, it encourages superficiality and thereby undermines productive human relationships. As Heidegger states, rather than foster existential concern and engagement, denial instead encourages “idle talk”(165) and “indifference”(235), and this intentional lack of concern ultimately undercuts both an individual’s personal life and social interactions. Because inauthentic being-toward-death is so detrimental, Heidegger recommends authentic being-toward-death. This entails “not actualization of death...[or a] dwelling near [it]...or a brooding over [it],” but instead “a

thinking about death...about this possibility” and an “enduring [of that possibility]”(241). Authentic being-toward-death brings individuals a certain “resoluteness”(247) and “freedom”(245). In fact, authenticity opens “the-potentiality-of-being-one’s-self” (247).

What is intriguing about *Four Sheets to the Wind*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* is that all three of these films bring to the fore what we normally try and repress. For various reasons, dead bodies are not things we want to have around. One of the main reasons is that corpses are clear symbols of our mortality. Who wants death staring us in the face even if it is something we should think about? And of course, there’s the stench. Fortunately, film provides audiences with sufficient distance from death to allay any unduly negative response. In fact, these films even make the confrontation with mortality palatable by capitalizing on our conventional discomfort with death to achieve their comic effect. For example, audiences certainly have what Cynthia Freeland describes as a satisfying, yet “ambivalent thrill”(287) when Pete comically pumps Melquiades’ corpse full of antifreeze in a desperate effort to forestall his friend’s further decomposition. Likewise, audiences shiver delightfully when Grandpa Hoover’s corpse lurches precipitously out the window and nearly out of Richard’s grasp. We also shudder gleefully +at the thought of his body ripening in the back of the bus as Olive performs at the pageant. Ultimately, these films illustrate a claim the philosopher Martha Nussbaum makes regarding the heuristic function of literature. As she states in her work, *Love’s Knowledge*, literature and film are often particularly instructive because they “place us in a position that is both like and unlike the one we occupy in life: like in that we are emotionally involved with the characters, active with them...unlike, in that we are free from certain sources of distortion that frequently impede our real-life deliberations. Since the story is not ours, we do not find ourselves caught up in...or blind[ed]” by our own resistance to uncomfortable truths (48).

Rather than prompt us to further deny death, the humor in *Four Sheets to the Wind*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* make us receptive to the insight about mortality that these works provide. Indeed, the corpses in these works arouse a feeling that Heidegger associates with the move toward authenticity, namely “uncanniness” (255). According to Heidegger, things that are uncanny simultaneously elicit a sense of unease and recognition. They do so because they draw our attention to features of the human condition we *know*, but don’t like to *admit*. He argues that if we listen to it, the feeling of uncanniness can act as a catalyst for authenticity, insofar as it directs us to things to which we need to attend.

In each film considered the corpse is an obvious—and unpleasant—reminder of human mortality. While all three films utilize our ordinary aversion to dead things for comic effect, by having their main characters literally carry the dead they illustrate that a willingness to embrace mortality improves, rather than undermines, human experience. No one suffers from their contact with mortality in any one of the films. Instead, the characters that carry the dead are improved. They are made authentic by it. Rather than “postpone” thinking about death, and as a result unwittingly postpone living, the characters in these films openly confront “the constant threat” that affects all living beings (Heidegger 238, 247). The confrontation with death gives these individuals

direction. As Heidegger suggests it will, cognizance of death gives individuals a deeper appreciation of time. He states, “it frees [them] from lostness in chance possibilities” that follows from individuals thinking that they have all the time the world (243). Moreover, it improves the quality of their interpersonal relationships. As the films illustrate, after losing someone they love, the main characters realize that they should no longer take others for granted. Their encounter with death returns them to life more invested in their relationships. It makes them better fathers, better sons, and better friends.

What is significant about *Four Sheets to the Wind* is that unlike the other two films, it allows to the dead to tell their tale. As we discover at the end of the film, the anonymous narrator to whom we have listened throughout the film is Cufe’s father, Frank Smallhill, the same figure whose dead body we saw Cufe dragging in the opening sequence. By giving death a voice, *Four Sheets to the Wind* goes further than *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* with respect to informing audiences about the importance of coming to grips with death. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Harjo lets his dead man tell a tale. Ironically, this dead man was known for his silence. In his closing narrative, Frank remarks how he was criticized for not speaking enough when he was alive. He explains his silence: “I just like listening I guess.” However, he also questions how much he was able to teach Cufe and his sister Miri (Tamara Podemski) given his quiet nature. Despite being taciturn, Frank is a teacher. He not only teaches his children, he also instructs audiences about life and death. Ultimately, Sterlin Harjo drives home the message that we need to confront death by giving death a voice. He gives the dead a voice because the dead tell a tale that the living need to hear.

### Works Cited

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