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English 1102

23 November 2010

The Sound of Acceptance

“But if a man does know he's about to die and dies anyway. Dies- dies willingly, knowing that he could stop it, then- I mean, isn't that the type of man who you want to keep alive?” In the film, *Stranger than Fiction*, author Karen Eiffel poses this question concerning Harold Crick, the main character in her new novel. Harold is an auditor for the Internal Revenue Service, he lives alone, he is extremely gifted in mathematical calculations and his life is being narrated by a female, British voice. Initially, the protagonist is a timid man dominated by the formulaic ordinary life, but as he is faced with the possibility of death, his character completely evolves. Many scenes incorporate musical pieces that accent the action and dialogue on screen, while forwarding the plot on their own. The varying instrumentation and song styles presented in this film walk hand in hand with the Harold's character development from security to freedom to sacrifice.

The first scene of the film begins with a shot of the world from outer space. As the camera zooms in, chaotic clock ticking and watch alarm sounds are present behind a narrator's voice introducing Harold. The shot concludes with his wristwatch beside him on his nightstand. Those sounds along with the emphasis of his wristwatch are the first indications that time is a crucial element in the plot. As Harold begins his habitual routine, the voice describes the intricate details involved and a piano is introduced. This piano intros into an instrumental section of the song *The Way We Get By* by Spoon. Throughout the song, the piano beat is stiff and it is accented by a tambourine, drums, and hand claps that mimic that same fast paced even tempo. The methodical rhythm of the song adds to the preciseness of Harold's daily schedule. On top of the instrumentation, the song's title allows the audience to infer that Harold is just “getting by,, with each day. The absence of lyrics highlights the

narrator's voice as she gives insight into Harold's actions and the motives behind them. The music in *Stranger than Fiction's* opening scene characterizes the main character as a man dominated by the repeated pattern he has abided by everyday of his life.

After Harold hears of his “imminent death,, he begins to release himself from his typical cycle and he embraces his underlying ambitions. When professor Hilbert asks him if he has any aspirations, Harold responds by explaining that he has always wanted to learn to play the guitar. From there, he buys a guitar and pursues his goal with full force. Later on, he realizes he must take initiative with his feelings toward the baker he is auditing, Ana Pascal, so he brings her baking flours as a peace offering. After they enjoy dinner together, Ana is in the kitchen washing dishes and Harold picks up her guitar and sits down to play. Each strum is filled with devotion and he sings quietly with his eyes closed. Ana watches him from a distance and as he continues she is enthralled with the melody. She mouths the words of the song and then sinks into the couch beside him, looking at him longingly. When he opens his eyes, she kisses him passionately and the guitar falls to the side. Right then the recording of the song he was playing, *Whole Wide World* by Wreckless Eric, kicks in. The contrast from the timid acoustic performance by Harold and the upbeat, electric rock recording, demonstrates the distinct before and after. When he begins to play, he is courageously professing his love for Ana, despite his fears. He sings the prominent line in this song's chorus: “I'd go the whole wide world / Just to find her,, (ll. 6-7). This lyric demonstrates the uncomfortable strides Harold had to take in order to portray his feelings for Ana. When the song transitions to the recording, that hard rock sound reflects Ana's reception of Harold's love. The division of *Whole Wide World* marks the point of the story when Harold opens himself up to love, which is something he never seemed to give much thought to before he met Miss Pascal.

“Penny, I killed them all,, exclaims Karen Eiffel as she realizes that Harold is one of many characters she sentenced to death. As she stares at the ceiling reflectively, the beautiful piano piece,

Horizon Variations by Max Richter, fades in and the scene changes to focus on Harold reading the novel on a bus. The score differs from the first scene's music in that the piano is no longer staccato, but rather it flows smoothly and effortlessly. Also, the song is not accompanied by any percussion instruments to enforce a steady rhythm. The transformation of the piano playing style from the first scene to this one towards the end of the film follows the protagonist's metamorphosis. Harold leaps off the bus to catch Ms. Eiffel, with the novel in hand and a slight grin on his face. While she seems flustered, Harold remains confident and calm as he explains that the book is incredible. Harold continues to say, "There is only one way it can end...I love your book, and I think you should finish it.,, The song is an anthem of Harold's acceptance of his looming death. The melodic and self-assured piano playing style reveals a maturity that Harold has now reached. He no longer faces his death with fear, but with a selflessness that could only sprout from a life well lived. In only a short time, this man went from a monotonous life to one of spontaneity and love. The realization he comes to that the quality of life trumps the quantity enables Harold to become a noble martyr.

In *Stranger than Fiction*, the protagonist's lifestyle alteration is not only defined by his words and actions, but also the musical accompaniments that are introduced alongside the plot. The songs illustrate Harold's transformation from a man of fearful comfort into a courageous hero. At first, Harold is characterized by the short predictable piano notes played in *The Way We Get By*. When he hears of his death, he decides to take his life as well as the soundtrack of the film into his own hand by professing his love to Ana through song. When given the chance to escape his written fate, Harold refuses because he understands what matters most in his own life and life as a whole. The piano reappears, but this time in a completely different fashion, just as Harold has become an entirely different man. In this case, the musical accompaniments speak the most truth about Harold Crick.

Word Count: 1123

Works Cited

Stranger Than Fiction. Marc Forster. Dir. Columbia Pictures. 2006. Film.

Lyrics: *Whole Wide World* by Wreckless Eric

1. When I was a young boy
2. My mama said to me
3. There's only one girl in the world for you
4. And she probably lives in Tahiti

5. I'd go the whole wide world
6. I'd go the whole wide world
7. Just to find her

8. Or maybe she's in the Bahamas
9. Where the Carribean sea is blue
10. Weeping in a tropical moonlit night
11. Because nobody's told her 'bout you

12. I'd go the whole wide world
13. I'd go the whole wide world
14. Just to find her
15. I'd go the whole wide world
16. I'd go the whole wide world
17. Find out where they hide her

18. Why am I hanging around in the rain out here
19. Trying to pick up a girl
20. Why are my eyes filling up with these lonely tears
21. When there're girls all over the world

22. Is she lying on a tropical beach somewhere
23. Underneath the tropical sun
24. Pining away in a heatwave there
25. Hoping that I won't be long

26. I should be lying on that sun-soaked beach with her
27. Caressing her warm brown skin
28. And then in a year or maybe not quite
29. We'll be sharing the same next of kin

30. I'd go the whole wide world
31. I'd go the whole wide world
32. Just to find her
33. I'd go the whole wide world

34. I'd go the whole wide world
35. Find out where they hide her

