Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 12
Issue 1 *April 2008*

Article 6

4-1-2008

Before the Devil Knows You're Dead

James Thrall
Knox College, jthrall@knox.edu

Recommended Citation

Thrall, James (2008) "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 6.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.12.01.06
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol12/iss1/6

Before the Devil Knows You're Dead

Abstract

This is a review of *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007).

Calling Before the Devil Knows You're Dead a biblical allegory would give only the most reductive representation of its complex characterization of the human condition. Sidney Lumet's film manages its own gravitas quite well without any facile reliance on biblical tropes for profundity. At the same time this intimate look at brothers, sons, and fathers assumes biblical resonances, recasting as it recalls themes of birthright and patriarchal blessing, sin and a desperate need for atonement that color its narrative with distorted echoes of old, old stories.

The two prodigal sons in this parable choose to take rather than ask for their inheritance, planning a fool-proof robbery of their parents' jewelry store. In this case, it is the older son Andy, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, who has squandered what wherewithal he has managed to acquire through his own ambitions. Despite the six-figure salary he proudly references, he is about to be caught in the embezzlement with which he has supported a lavish lifestyle of drug use and visits to his pusher-prostitute boyfriend. Younger son Hank (Ethan Hawke) has only his nature as a loser to blame for being too cash-strapped to meet his obligations for child support. From the initiatory point of these straightforward financial dilemmas, the film turns its screws relentlessly in depicting the brothers' shared descent into even deeper hopelessness. For of course, in a world where nothing is perfect, the robbery goes horribly wrong.

Hawke's depiction of the hapless Hank, whose measure even his school-aged daughter accurately pegs, is utterly convincing, but the film really belongs to Hoffman. From the opening shot of Andy watching himself in a mirror as he makes love to his wife Gina, Hoffman's nuanced presentation of a man bent on self-justification as much as self-preservation warrants the earlier made predictions of Oscar nomination. Hoffman's Andy is dominatingly clever, manipulating the weaker Hank into the robbery attempt as only an older sibling can. Echoes of childhood dares are underscored as Andy makes sure Hank hasn't crossed his fingers in promising to join in. When Hank sums his brother up - "You're a prick, Andy" - Andy readily agrees: "I always was." What Andy wants is simply "out," to "start over" on a life that, through his own doing, has boxed him into a corner. There's a hint of wanting "do overs" in kick the can, but an even stronger hint of wanting redemption from the mortal state of sin. Andy may boast "I'm smart. I know the angles," but unlike the computations in his office accounting that add up "clean, clear, absolute," his life shows no tidy total. "I'm not the sum of my parts," he tells his unsympathetic lover. "All of my parts don't add up to one me."

More to the point, Andy may be the smarter, older son, but it's the failure Hank, in nods to Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, who always wins the parental blessing. When confronted by Gina's news that she and Hank have been having an affair, Andy manages to convey decades of resentment and resignation, with a

touch of incredulity that someone would yet again prefer such a fool, in the single utterance of Hank's name. An effort by their father Charles to apologize for being harder on Andy as first son than on Hank earns only a rebuff. "He can't just say he's sorry and make it all go away," Andy later sobs, and neither, it seems, can anyone else. "I'm sorry" sounds like a refrain through the film as characters apologize for offences big and small, but forgiveness is in short supply, as is any chance for escape from the tragic flow of events.

Lumet's use of color combines with the shifting time frames through which the narrative unfolds to present the pivotal robbery in all its facets of conception, execution and consequence. A change in Andy's shirt from blue to a warmer yellow, for example, marks a jump back to a more promising moment when the heist is still the anticipated slam-dunk that will solve all the brothers' problems. By contrast, a prevalent cold blue filter, especially in shooting such starkly alienating interior spaces as the rental real estate office where the brothers work, and Andy's and Gina's pristine upscale apartment, underscores the empty claustrophobia of their lives. Deserted by Gina and besieged by the results of his own misdeeds, Andy's trashing of the apartment culminates in the slow dumping of decorative pebbles on a glass-topped table as any chance to control the increasing chaos of his life slips through his fingers. So damped down that his tears of anger at his father are a shockingly revealing anomaly, Andy fails at first even to respond to Gina's

departure. "Aren't you going to say anything," Gina asks. "Aren't you going to get angry?" His final explosion, when it comes, is a brutal effort to achieve his own salvation, to break through the limitations that would keep him from getting "out." His father's blessing will come at last, but too late, as the trappings not of atoning forgiveness but of revenge. As a crooked jeweler tells Charles, "the world is an evil place ... Some of us make money off it, and some of us get destroyed." This film makes strikingly real the harsh absence of any other choice.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.12.01.06