

**Tequila is My Lady:
The Cabin in the Woods as a Nihilistically Half Full Glass**

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[1] *The Cabin in the Woods* deviates from the horror genre and Whedon's other works by using similar tropes but ending with nihilistically existential concepts. The horror genre tends to be anti-existential in the sense that the characters within the genre are accepting of free will or believe he or she has the ability to affect his or her own life through actions of free will. There is the willingness of characters to overcome their obstacles, many overt with moral themes, with an undertone of religion. Some of the ideas presented in existentialist philosophy are that the world is meaningless, peoples' actions are unimportant, and that life is absurd. *The Cabin in the Woods* encompasses all of these ideas, while rejecting characteristics of the horror genre. An example of this is how the film monitors the lives of five young adults, however, deviates from the genre by skewing the characteristics of those five, such as the Athlete being a Sociology major on a scholarship and the Virgin not actually being a virgin. The beginning of the film opens with a casual conversation between two middle-aged male adults, instead of setting the horrific tone with a young female's brutal murdered. Usually the five young adults confront a staggering, super-human killer, as the true antagonist, with an automated desire to kill, however, there are multiple layers of who the antagonist may be within the film.

[2] Nihilism is prescribed to one who believes "in nothing; hence nothing stands to block their destructive impulses...that there is a logical connection between what one believes about ultimate reality, one's sense of purpose, one's values, and one's concrete actions" (Barnes 98). Prima facie, this idea implies negativity or at least implies self-destruction if not anti-self-preservation. *Cabin* acts as a response to one of Whedon's critiques on the world, although the success of the call to action is ambiguous. He created something because he believed something to be of negative criticism. In *Joss Whedon & Religion*, Poole states that, "Annihilation doesn't have to come with a howl of despair, however...Here, Whedon departs from both his Lovecraftian influences and the Christian narrative that would seek to deny, or perhaps simply cloak, nihilism with various theologies of hope" (Poole 223). It is questionable whether Dana and Marty, as the 'Final Two' consciously decide to end the world because of their loss of hope or because of their pursuit in a new hope. In *Existentialism and Religious Belief*, one of the famous interpreters of Nihilism proposes a reason for the characters' actions:

Nietzsche believed that the old norms of transcendent goodness, truth, and beauty were dead, and that it was necessary for modern man to say ‘No’ to them. But he regarded this destruction as a transitional phase in the preparation of a new stage of history. In it man will himself take over the task of creating value which will be defined in terms of what preserves and enhances life amidst the struggle for survival. (Heidegger 183)

[3] Countering the argument that many of Whedon’s works are extensions of his existential views, *The Cabin in the Woods* is the only work of his that fully conveys and supports ideas of existential nihilism, the belief that nothing matters. As opposed to existentialism – the belief that life is meaningless, nihilism presents ideas that what we do as human beings is also meaningless. Although Whedon’s motive for creating the film is to critique society, the film demonstrates that human life is insignificant, that the human effort is trivial, and that no one is in full control despite his or her beliefs that they are. The influence of the film stems from the videotaped honor killing of Du’a Khalil Aswad, giving credit to violently voyeuristic tendencies of society (Giannini).

[4] *The Cabin in the Woods* comments on society’s obsession with voyeurism, especially through film on various levels. Whedon states, “On another level it’s a serious critique of what we love and what we don’t about horror movies” (*TotalFilm* 1). Although subtly done, in the cellar Marty examines a roll of film while the others look at various objects. Beginning with Shakespeare’s time, it is the fool who knows something truthful that others do not, yet others do not listen because of the stereotype of the fool. In a sense, Marty tells the audience that they are being watched from the moment he picks up the film and surveys it with intrigue. The horror genre historically showcases acts of voyeurism, beginning with *Peeping Tom* and *Psycho* in the 1960s. Whedon’s direct homage to voyeurism is shown through the scientists’ storyline. The scientists obviously demonstrate, mock, and teach the audience of its own voyeurism to the group of young adults within the film. When the scientists watch the horrific deaths of the young adults, the audience simultaneously watches those gruesome acts. On the second level of voyeurism, there are the Ancient Ones. In a response to Truman’s questioning of why certain protocol is necessary one of the scientists, Sitterson, replies, “we’re not the only ones watching. Gotta keep the customer happy” (*The Cabin in the Woods*). Sitterson is not only referring to the Ancient Ones, but also indirectly to the audience.

[5] The horror genre is contained by certain tropes that inform the audience that the film is within the genre, to the point that the viewer is often aware of what he or she will view. This aspect is one that *Cabin* takes advantage of and uses to drive the film in a different direction from other films within the genre. The film echoes Film Studies

scholar Carol Clover's theories outlined in "Her Body, Himself" from the Terrible Place to the Victims to the Final Girl. *The Cabin in the Woods* pays tribute to the horror film, but also encourages the genre to deviate from expectations. The film is a response to the horror genre as Whedon states, "things that I don't like are kids acting like idiots, the devolution of the horror movie into torture porn and into a long series of sadistic comeuppances. Drew and I both felt that the pendulum had swung a little too far in that direction" (Total Film 1). *Film and Ethics* explains:

Representation is never straightforwardly 'real,' whether the acts represented are simulated or are actually taking place... While sexism, non-consensual violence and other forms of socio-economic, ethnic and sexual power imbalances are definitely 'real' at the level of social life, it is easier to attack representations than the complex and multivalent sources of social injustice. (Downing 88)

Whedon has expressed his disgust with society's behavior towards the video of a girl, and aside from his criticism of the 'real' he wrote *The Cabin in the Woods*. Perhaps it is easier for the audience to criticize and view the actions of society through film and representation of life than it is for people to criticize people. The film is a reaction to humanity's behavior, and acts as a discussion for how humanity should perceive itself.

[6] In opposition to television, films have a shortened period of time to convince the viewer that characters are worth caring about. The viewer follows the journey for 90 minutes or so, and then the journey ends. Unlike many films in the horror genre, the young adults are only subjected to the confines of the cabin for two acts. This choice allows the third act to take place in what Clover calls the Terrible Tunnel "dark, exitless, slick with blood... walls that hold the victim in" (Clover 31). This place allows the characters to reflect on their previous actions, lives, reasons why they might have been chosen for sacrificial purposes. The film acknowledges that once it is understood that there is no meaning to action, existence ceases.

[7] Whedon – horror fan, feminist, occasional angry blogger – cites in a blog that his inspiration for this violent film is violence in life. Believing the idea that the horror genre can be sliced into subgenres, *The Cabin in the Woods* is a response to society's strange fascination with violence, but it is also contained within the typical horror genre. Usually in the horror genre, the villain (monster or killer) harms others for a reason. Whatever that reason – to punish, to purge, to play – the emphasis is on the fact that the killer cares. The murders in film act as a catharsis for the antagonist, which is finely juxtaposed with the nonchalant attitudes of the protagonists or victims. After contact with the killer, the protagonists care about their lives, and their desires become emphasized

when the idea of death comes close. Characters beg for their lives, as if their lives are contributive to humanity without the idea of possibility that humanity is non-contributive. Without the proximity of death, however, people tend to live within a different code of ethics as if their actions do not matter. *The Cabin in the Woods* explores this idea, deviates, and then returns to it with a splash of cold water.

[8] In a counterargument to how other works by Whedon are existential, South cites an episode of *Angel*. In this episode, Angel states “in the greater scheme or the big picture, nothing we do matters. There’s no grand plan, no big win...all that matters is what we do, ‘cause that’s all there is” (“Epiphany” A2016). This conveys Whedon’s idea that what people do matters, and *Cabin* explores this idea but concludes that what people do doesn’t matter. Mentioned earlier was a comparison of the scientists to Sisyphus. Essentially, Whedon’s characters in his previous works and the scientists are reflections of this Greek myth. They struggle within a timeframe, overcome that struggle, and pause in contemplation of this celebratory moment, only to repeat the process again. If there is knowledge of how meaningless their actions are, what follows is a suspension of disbelief that things may turn out meaningful. Albert Camus articulates:

But what does life mean in such a universe? Nothing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given. Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary. (Camus 581)

The scientists concoct this annual ritual of sacrifice, presumably preparing devices, formulas, victims, and an ultimate plan to appease the Ancient Ones. For Sisyphus, his timeframe is as long as it takes him to push a rock uphill, and for the scientists, it is a year. What Camus points to, though, is that the timeframe is insignificant due to the kind of amnesia people bring upon themselves.

[9] The film can be separated into two parts: the storyline of the scientists and the storyline of the young adults. The young adults fulfill their paradigmatic functions in the horror genre structure. The formula that the film follows abides by the paradigm that there must be at least five main teenagers or college-aged kids. Another paradigm is that they must travel to the Terrible Place and partake in actions dealing with the sin factor. Similar to many slasher films, *The Cabin in the Woods* includes the virgin (Final Girl), the fool, the intellectual, the athlete, and the non-virginal girl. Although the film includes these stereotypes, there is deviation from their natures. The virgin is not a virgin, the fool is not foolish, the scholar gives incorrect perspectives, the athlete cares about others, and the non-virginal girl is pre-med. These deviations demonstrate the *abilities* of people to

exceed their limitations, much like how the film demonstrates the ability to supersede the expectations of the horror film. But in the end, abilities do not mean much unless they lead to something – success, betterment of society, or not ending the world for example.

[10] The film, like the characters, exudes a possibility, representing freethinking. It explores Camus' questioning theory that, if life is meaningless, the primary question people should ponder is suicide (*The Myth of Sisyphus*). He explicates his observations that ironically men have died for causes they considered worth living for but also because they have considered life *not* worth living. People continue to live out of habit for living, but the characters in *The Cabin in the Woods* break this habit. The film makes a dark commentary on the state of humanity, and encourages this idea of meaninglessness. If there is a moment of clarity or sense of meaning for people, it is a fleeting one. The film comments on the ephemerality of the state of humanity as a whole, emphasizing that nihilism is a fair response. The horror genre has previously negated actions dealing with the sin factor, as well as nihilism as a justification, but *The Cabin in the Woods* demonstrates how those negations do not really matter. In an age of endless sequels, redundant remakes, and preachy moral themes, *Cabin* embraces nihilism, an idea not conducive to the perpetuation of a functioning society.

[11] Throughout *Cabin*, the illusion of free will is apparent. Jules, the non-virginal girl, thinks she is in control over her behavior in the cabin, yet the scientists control her actions through the chemicals in her hair dye. She believes that her actions following her 'dare' are of her own, but are actually influenced by the scientists for the purpose of appeasing the Ancient Ones. The chemicals within the cabin are utilized again when Curt makes the decision that everyone should stick together no matter what because the group will be safer that way. Hadley, one of the scientists, hits his head because this decision is smart, and deviates from a decision a character in another film might make, and above all, complicates the job of the scientists if the group stays together. The scientists give Curt a burst of chemicals that impair his judgment and he retracts his previous statement, and uses the standard horror genre idea for the group to split up, because they can "cover more ground that way" (*The Cabin in the Woods*). The first three victims want to think freely, yet are not. What separates the Final Two from the rest is that they are freethinking. They purposefully make the decision to bring about the world's end.

[12] The characters' belief that they have free will continues with some of their demises. Curt believes that he can jump via motorcycle across a crevice of the road, and get help for the rest of the group. Also, the intellectual, Holden, recites a speech whilst driving back to the cabin in the woods in the RV. He strongly states, "I'm going through. We'll just drive – there's gotta be another road, another way out of here... then we'll

leave the roads altogether, drive as far as we can into the forest, go on foot from there” (*The Cabin in the Woods*). Dana refutes his speech, and not only knows that it does not matter where they drive to but states this fact as well. Even the scientists believe that they have free will, but they prove to be wrong. The way the scientists control the group of young adults makes them feel as if they have control over their destinies, the destinies of the world, and of themselves. They are simply slaves, however, to a higher power, the Ancient Ones.

[13] If the film struggles to emphasize that humans are freethinking individuals, why did the ending imply that they are not worth saving? As Sartre explains in his essay, “man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity, the name we are labeled with when charges are brought against us. But what do we mean by this, if not that man has a greater dignity than a stone or table” (“Existentialism is a Humanism”). This idea could apply not just to the characters as singular people, but could also apply to the scientists’ labeling of the characters, embracing the idea of man as more than oneself. If existentialism claims that man is responsible for himself, and there is no God or pre-existing being, then *The Cabin in the Woods* subverts its own plotline to follow this claim. For example, it appears the group of young adults is in control of their lives, rather the scientists are in control of those same lives, culminating in the belief that a larger entity is in control of everyone’s lives, as long as man allows it to be. The ending can be misleading in the sense that it appears the Final Two bring about the end of the world. The scientists, however, were actually *stalling* this fate; the scientists were Sisyphus and fate was the rock. They held onto the disillusionment that they were in control of their destiny, but more than that, they anguished, worried, and celebrated when they believed they actually changed peoples’ destinies.

[14] The scientists are a reflection of man’s responsibility of the self, or the goal to preserve humanity. This group is the metaphysical aspect of the film. They are the voyeuristic group that recognizes the existence of meta-horror. What they view on their screens is what the viewer sees. The scientists represent the notion that the audience has power in what is portrayed on film, but *Cabin* ultimately rejects this notion. In the end, the scientists have no control over the actions of their subjects, presenting the idea that viewers have no control and, by the existentialist belief, humans have no control in affecting an end result. Humans exist, but “existence comes before essence” (Sartre). Certain films that demonstrate religious themes call to the chant that, “Together we can beat this thing...Across a whole range of eschatologically themes films, therefore, a realized, this-worldly, and anthropocentric dimension, in which human agency and endeavor supplant divine activity, can be seen to prevail” (Deacy 188-189). This is the belief that appears in *Cabin*, but the problem is that the characters would never ultimately

beat the Ancient Ones. The set group of young adults would simply complete one cycle in the many to come in order to keep the monsters at bay.

[15] Whedon's previous works reflect his existentialist ideas that what people do matters, all the while playing with the question of the presence of higher powers. Many texts have been written about Whedon's previous works and their relation to religion and purpose. James South explains "prophecies certainly play a larger role in the lives of *Buffyverse* regulars than other religious symbols or objects. Yet they, too, are connected implicitly and explicitly to demons, and are routinely evaded or circumvented" (South 222). This commentary applies to *The Cabin in the Woods*, but the film raises the question of what happens when the characters stop caring about evading or circumventing these prophecies. Faith keeps the *Buffyverse* intact, and hopelessness destroys the Cabinverse.

[16] What will the characters do after the acceptance of the meaningless of life, or they become relieved of their duties? In *Film and Ethics*, Libby Saxton comments that "ethics, we are told, 'must be sacrificed in the name of duty', while this sacrifice must simultaneously recognize, confirm and reaffirm ethics" (Saxton 111). The film calls to question whether duties are truly ethical in the moral perspective of how to treat people. The horror genre also comments on the immorality of placing groups of people with certain qualities into paradigms.

[17] In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the world is presented with supernatural obstacles that represent the idea of evil. Despite all these obstacles, the characters still strive to save the world every day. No matter what happens, how many lives are lost or how undeserving humanity seems, the characters have faith that the world is worth saving and that their actions matter. In "The Wish," an alternate, apocalyptic reality is created and emphasizes how bad the world can get. As the world demonstrates worst-case scenarios, a demon asks Giles, "How do you know the other world is any better than this?" Giles responds, "Because it has to be" (B3009). This belief that the world can be a better place is instilled throughout the show. The characters never stop hoping or questioning how life can be better. South notes that characters continue fighting evil because they feel that they have to and that in the world of *Buffy* "the structure and even the very existence of our world are determined by our basic choices" (South 106). Whedon creates worlds filled with weighty choices, exploring characters' reactions and by extension, peoples' reactions.

[18] The idea of destiny or prophecy is central to *The Cabin in the Woods* because it presents the acceptance of a greater force and the realization that actions do not matter. The young adults and scientists differ in that eventually no matter whose destiny it is, he

or she may decide to accept it or not. The scientists play God with the lives of the young adults, realizing that they are in control of some of their actions, but ultimately that God will prevail. The philosophical metaphor in the film is that it seems that everyone thinks he or she chooses actions that lead to certain futures, but actually they do not. The film presents different sacrifices in the form of archetypal characters for various regions of the world, exposing the universal idea that human life is important enough to sacrifice some within humanity for the betterment of the whole.

[19] These Utilitarian ideas that the young adults should do the greatest good for the greatest number, which in their case is dying off one by one, relates to how humans treat one another. The scientists reinforce this idea, which can seem convincing, if of course, you are not chosen to be sacrificed. The characters' final decisions reflect their indifference to Utilitarianism in that they could have saved humanity, but do not. The lighting of the joint at the end drives this point home, and returns to horror genre norms with the sin factor – drugs, as an extension of sexual relations, bring about death. In contrasting the film to other Whedon texts, other characters explore deontological ethics – or the notion that one should live out of principle and duty. The best example of this is Buffy's journey and her difficulty in deviating from her duties. The characters in the film had a duty to fulfill their destinies, but according to the most notable deontological philosopher, Kant, one must have good will in order to truly act morally responsible. The characters are burdened with duty and left with little time to ponder whether they have good will or not. The scientists act from duty, but because their good will is not so, well, good, they too act immorally.

[20] At the root of ethics is the question of how to live morally. If Whedon is correct in his speculation that if nothing else matters, what we do matters, then the character of Truman, a rookie security guard for the scientists, gives testament to this idea. As other employees of the facility make bets on the killings of the young people, Truman refuses and openly chastises this behavior. He is the moral center of the environment, presumably due to his naivety but arguably due to his justification in his partaking of the ritual for the benefit of humanity. He demonstrates an ethical viewpoint, while serving an unethical ritual, underlining the shades of grey in moral and immoral actions. The film proves, however, that his moral upstanding position does not matter because he dies in a vicious manner just as the rest of the scientists do. His presence is important in emphasis of the film's existential qualities. In religion and philosophy, there is the idea that if one acts morally, then he or she will be rewarded. Even the horror genre highlights this point. Whether or not people act morally within the Cabinverse, they die eventually. Sometimes there are ironic deaths, such as Curt or Hadley's, that reference their significance in life, but mainly the killings prove that lives are meaningless.

[21] Within the horror genre, it has been successful, encouraged, and mundane to torture females. Clover's coining of the term, Final Girl, notes that even if females are the ones who are mainly murdered, the last person standing is also female. Williams critiques Clover's theory and states, "This argument holds that when the girl-victim of a film like *Halloween* finally grabs the phallic knife, or ax, or chain saw to turn the tables on the monster-killer, that viewer identification shifts from an 'abject terror gendered feminine' to an active power with bisexual components" (Williams 7). *The Cabin in the Woods* strays from the execution of this idea by splitting the role of the Final Girl into two. This decision in the film allows both final characters to exude non-gender specific roles. The male does not have to exude masculine-distinct qualities or have a macho physique. Nor does the female have to come off as gritty or butch to convince the audience of her accomplishment in defeating the monster-killer.

[22] The Terrible Place is paradigmatic to the horror genre; the place that is distant enough from the viewer's ordinary life but close enough to instill fear. Obviously, the Terrible Place is the cabin, but differs from settings in other horror films because of the emphasis of the lack of escape. Often, it is difficult to escape the Terrible Place in horror films, but in *The Cabin in the Woods*, it is literally impossible for the young adults to leave without defeating their oppressors, who are the Ancient Ones, not the scientists. Therefore, the idea of defeating higher powers is linked with the impossibility of defeating life through action. The Final Girl, Dana, has a revelation that no matter where the young adults try to travel they cannot escape the place representative of life. In response to Holden's plan of escape, Dana says, "that won't work. Something'll happen. It'll collapse, it'll wash away...you're missing the point" (*The Cabin in the Woods*). Similarly representing the idea of entrapment are the surroundings of the Terrible Place. The electronically powered fence in the film is a crucial symbol for the metaphor of life as a walled-in structure with God on the periphery of it. Clover's idea of the Terrible Tunnel can also be found within the film, although there are allusions to multiple tunnels, such as the tunnel on the road, the elevator to the underground facility, and the floor doors to the basement. These tunnels symbolize the notion that one progresses, but ultimately delves into deeper, similar versions of the position one is in.

[23] The movements of the camera also symbolize the mobile stillness by demonstrating the levels of knowledge characters hold. The camera moves slowly when the young people are learning a truth and then quickly when they act naively, or as young adults act in a kind of desperate, over-eager search for knowledge he or she is not ready for. Hadley, one of the scientists, comments on the tragedy of suffering upon the death of the young adults. The camera moves towards him, as if emphasizing the empathy humans can feel for each other and the closeness between people. He contemplatively says, "It's so strange, I'm actually rooting for this girl. She's got so much heart. When you think of

all the pain,” then snaps out of his humility to “tequila is my lady” (*The Cabin in the Woods*). Hadley almost reaches the conclusion that no one in life deserves suffering before fleeing from this moral sympathy. He compares tequila to the light in the young adults’ suffering to the darkness, indicating a lack of desire in finding knowledge. Similarly, the film as a whole acts as an amnesiac critique. The film begins with the purpose to subvert a horror genre, commenting on humanity’s sick fascination with gore, but then the film tortures a girl, falling into the very category it was trying to criticize. The film’s ending also suffers from amnesiac critique where it works to vouch for humanity, and then obliterates it.

[24] *The Cabin in the Woods* calls to question whether humanity is worth saving or not, whether what people do actually matters, and whether or not the film establishes a positive criticism, moving past society’s perpetuations. If Whedon were trying to change the way society values human life, his use of voyeurism is effective. The ending is positive in a sense because it comments on society’s digression into grotesque chaos, but also suggests that humanity deserves a second chance to get it right. The Final Two see the silver lining of the end of the world. Although their view may be arrogant or ignorant, it is hopeful and exemplifies a youth’s perspective. As well as being hopeful, it is also poorly thought out and fleeting. Their plan all along was not to give society another chance, but based on a whim. It is not as though they really care about society or even themselves; they could care not less. They are about to die and bring about an apocalypse and they are smoking a joint. Just as the scientists forget about the pain of the young adults once tequila is brought in, the film comments on society’s own dismissal of the pain of others. It is questionable whether this amnesia is playful or joyful, but *Cabin* really made an effort to better society. Whedon’s exploration of the philosophy that what we do matters is influential in the world of film, but contradicts itself in the grand scheme of things. Ultimately, Whedon created a film that conveys meaninglessness within a genre that perpetually advocates for meaning. Due to the film’s fairly recent release, it is questionable whether the film really makes an impact in the horror genre or completes the meta-cyclical journey of not really meaning that much...but does it really matter anyways?

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