**CHAPTER TWO ESSAY**

HAPPINESS

There are several protagonists and storylines in the movie Happiness that are all indirectly related. The all the stories branch out from three sisters, Joy, Helen and Trish. Joy is single, still lives with her parents, and is stuck in a dead end job with dreams of becoming a musician. Helen is a famous novelist with a long list of men pining after her, none of whom she has the slightest interest in. Trish is a mother of three children, who is happily married despite the lack of intimacy in her relationship.

The movie feels like a drama, because its content is very heavy. Trish’s husband is a pedophile who rapes two of his son’s classmates. Allen, a neighbor of Helen’s, gets off by calling women in the phonebook and telling them sexually aggressive and explicit things. Another neighbor, Kristina, who has some interest in Allen, tells him that she was raped by one of the doormen and that she killed him and was slowly throwing out pieces of him she’s kept in her freezer. The parent’s of the three sisters end up getting a divorce because their father no longer loves anyone or feels anything and wants to live alone.

The theme of the film seems to be unhealthy relationships. All the relationships between the characters are odd and feel uneasy. Whenever the sisters meet with each other, their dialogue gives the audience the sense that there is an underlying bite to each word and that there may be more competition and tension, than compassion and love between them. Throughout the film we see that Trish’s husband has a strange relationship with their oldest boy, Timmy. Timmy asked his father what “cum” was and then expressed worry about his not being able to do so. His father responded by asking if Timmy had tried to play with himself, and when Timmy expressed confusion over what this meant, his father asked if he wanted his father to show him.

There is also a theme of unhealthy relationships with sex. Most prominently, Trish’s husband is a pedophile. Then there is the father of the three girls, who after having sex with another woman, announces that he feels nothing. Kristina tells Allen that she had to kill the doorman after he raped her because she truly hates the idea of sex. When Allen calls Helen and she tells him to meet her and do exactly what he told her he would, he become wrought with fear and anxiety. He eventually does visit her, and she tells him it won’t work because he isn’t her type, solidifying his anxieties.

This movie works so well because of although there are so many different storylines, the viewer is never confused as to what’s going on. They all fit together and the narrative moves through them all seamlessly. Whenever a new character or plotline is introduced, the viewer never feels overburdened. The characters are also all very quirky without being alien. We feel like we know these characters, even if we don’t want to admit it, as is the case with the pedophilic father. They are all very human, and though no one is portrayed as a hero, we still route for them.

The film also does a good job at presenting its darker content in a way that is digestible. Although much of the film is dramatic, there are many points of comedic relief, where the ridiculous nature of the character or situation is heightened for the viewers’ enjoyment. For instance in the earlier part of the film, Allen is in a therapy session with Trish’s husband (a psychiatrist), and is complaining about how boring he is. As Allen goes on and on about how everyone perceives him as the most boring man on earth, Trish’s husband begins going over a list of things he needs to do in his head. Another good example is when Helen is in her apartment, thinking to herself what a fraud she is and how she writes all these books about rape when she’s never herself experienced it. There is also a scene in which the mother of the three girls cries in a real estate agents office after the agent asks if she is looking for a place to live all alone, by herself. The film ends on a rather comedic note as well, when Timmy announces that he has finally cum.

I learned from this film that even if the film deals with very serious and even hideous topics and ideas, moments of humor could be crafted in. It can only work if the humor is centered on the absurdity of the horrific thing. The movie was able to relate the audience to the world of sexual disorders and unusual relationships, and experience a wide range of emotions while doing so.

CLOSE MY EYES

This film involves two protagonists, Richard and Natalie, who are siblings that grew up apart from each other. When Richard moves back to England, where Natalie has been living, their relationship becomes very passionate. They can’t see each other without having sex, and when Natalie tries to end the physical relationship, Richard has a breakdown. The theme of the movie is the darker side of sex and sexuality, and more broadly the darkness in pleasure. Natalie calls what she and her brother have an addiction to each other, and when they try to break it they nearly kill themselves. They can’t keep away from each other, so much so that trying to do so almost ends their lives.

The movie feels like a drama and also a romance. There are long lingering, soft-lit shots of Natalie’s face through Richards point-of-view. Music plays when the siblings kiss and are in the throws of love, and there are scenes of them just holding one another post-coitus. The drama starts to pick up when Natalie tells Richard that they need to stop what they’re doing. Richard can’t except this and wants things to continue as they are. Natalie gives him tasks such as getting a girlfriend and visiting his boss, who has been diagnosed with AIDS, before she will see him next. Richard believes if he does these things, Natalie will eventually be with him.

Natalie is married to a man named Sinclair. When he begins to suspect Natalie is having an affair, the relationship between her and Richard becomes more strained. The grand conflict arises when Sinclair decides it would be better to try moving to America, as a way to get Natalie away from the mysterious lover. Upon hearing that Natalie will be leaving for America in a few days, Richard becomes overwhelmed by his emotions. He begs her not to go and threatens both of their lives. The two have a physical fight, which ends with them in the middle of a road almost being hit by a truck. This is the climax of the film, and it happens very close to the resolution.

I didn’t like this quick to resolve format of the film. So much of the movie was filled with love scenes and the building up of tensions between the siblings, that it was unsatisfying to have things wrap up so neat and swift. Right after the fight, Natalie tells Richard she and Sinclair actually won’t be going to America because Sinclair’s job fell through. Then Sinclair announces he knew something was going on between the siblings as he takes care of Natalie’s wounds. Then the three of them take a walk together through Sinclair’s large estate as the sun sets, and Sinclair states that it’s better their not leaving England because he would miss the cucumber sandwiches. After such an intense climax, involving the near death of both protagonists, this ending was a disappointing fizzle.

The characters were relatable, even though the situation they were in was so foreign. The dialogue expressed the pain of a forbidden love, which is something many of us can relate to. This, along with the many emotions the characters go through, made them identifiable personalities. Even though the act they commit is so disgusting, there’s a part of you that sympathizes with their plight.

The movie didn’t work as well for me, because it was trying to deal with too many things, ultimately failing to portray the complexity of anything. Aside from the incest going on through out the movie, one of the characters is diagnosed with AIDS, which comes up several times in the movie. This character, Richard’s boss, is even given an entire scene in which he vindicates himself despite his weakening state. Richard’s boss seemed to take the role of Richard’s self-discovery, while Natalie gets to go through her own personal challenges to herself. She has a temporary job that is unsatisfying and a marriage that isn’t stimulating, which she must sort out along with her confusing feelings for her brother. Richard’s entire world is only wrapped around his affections for Natalie, but he doesn’t have any personal struggles he must face. Throwing in a boss with AIDS was too much, and I found myself almost wanting to know more about the boss’ predicament, and his psychological trauma.

What I took away from the movie is that even with a topic so disgusting as incest, it is possible to make a movie that is both beautiful and romantic. Through the first part of the movie, it plays like a typical romance drama, aside from the fact that the lovers are sister/brother. I enjoyed their love, and sometimes forgot it was such a vile act. I don’t know if I want to emulate this in my movie, but it could be interesting to explore both the horrid and lovely aspects of the closeness between siblings.

DEAD RINGERS

This movie is about twin gynecologists, Eliot and Beverly, who share everything from their profession to their apartment to their love interests. Their personalities are slightly different, but not in a way that is evident to most people. They are able to switch roles with each other. For instance, if Eliot doesn’t want to attend dinner with a group of people, Beverly would go in his place. The characters were very relatable, although eccentric. The range of emotions they went through, and points in the dialogue in which they express their deep love for each other, made them sympathetic characters.

This film is a drama. The characters are often pushed to the limits of their emotional capabilities. However it also has the feel of a suspense or horror film. Things begin to escalate in a violent way towards the end, as the characters are no longer psychologically able to handle their situation. Much of the movie is shot in dimmer light during the second half of the film, and some frightening props (unorthodox gynecological tools) are introduced.

The first conflict arises when Beverly falls in love with an actress that Eliot tells him he “must try.” When Eliot asks for details of their rendezvous, Beverly refuses, stating he wants to keep it for himself. Eliot insists saying that if he didn’t experience it than neither has Beverly. This is one of the themes of the film; the dangerous dependence the twins have on each other in validating their individual, or not so individual identities.

Claire is the actress that Bev falls in love with. She has a slight problem with sleeping pills and amphetamines. One day a friend informs Claire that Bev has a twin brother. She begins to put the pieces together as to why Bev’s behavior comes across as erratic and slightly schizophrenic. She forces Bev to set up a meeting with her and the two of them. When all three are together, she confronts them about pretending to be one person, and points out the incestuous nature of the game they are playing. She ends things with them, and this crushes Bev. Eliot doesn’t understand Bev’s feelings for Claire, and this introduces a new element into their relationship. Never before has either one not been able to understand and fully empathize with the other.

After sometime, Bev and Claire get back together. Bev started taking amphetamine pills with Claire, in an attempt to make her see how much he loved her. This expresses another of the movie’s themes, which is the desire to share all experiences with the other. One night while Bev and Claire are sleeping, Bev has an ominous dream in which he and Eliot are Siamese twins attached at the stomach by a bridge of flesh. He tells Claire that he doesn’t want Eliot there with them, so she says that she will separate them and begins biting into the fleshy bridge between them. Bev wakes up frightened from the nightmare, and Claire gives him a sleeping pill, starting his addiction to those as well.

Bev’s drug addiction becomes the problem that eventually ends in the death of both twins, but it was really the attempt by Bev to seek independence from Eliot that starts their psychological collapse. Eliot tires to convince Claire that she should love him the way she loves Bev, so that things will stay normal. When she can’t comply with his request, Eliot asks if they are really that different. Eliot’s identity was symbolically broken in that moment, when he had to face that not everyone perceived him in the same way they perceived Bev. His whole existence and identity was built on the idea that he and Bev were one in the same. Claire was the force that disrupted this collective sense of identity between the twins. Bev’s drug addiction is a physical manifestation of this ruptured identity.

The film becomes a horror film once Bev is convinced that Claire has been unfaithful to him. Here again we see the dependence these characters have on the Other to confirm their Self. Before Claire has to go away on a business trip, Bev pleads with her: “Let’s not lose each other.” After Bev feels he has lost Claire, he becomes obsessed with deformed vaginas. Claire became a patient of their because she had a rare condition of having three cervixes, making her infertile. The twins specialize in women’s infertility. He begins seeing deformities in all his patients and goes on to get prototypes of medical tools that he has drawn up himself for these deformed women. I think this adds to the theme of fractured identity. After metaphorically losing Claire, Bev sees what was once so familiar to him as distorted and unrecognizable. It is especially significant, because Bev was the twin who headed all their research. This was really his area of expertise, and suddenly it was all strange and horrifying.

The tools he creates are absolutely terrifying and a bit like the tools you might expect a sadistic serial killer to have. When Bev tries to use these tools on a patient, he is barred from his practice. All the while Bev is spiraling out of control, Eliot has been trying to mend Bev’s patient relationships and rehabilitate him from the drug abuse. Eliot tries to fix things for Bev with the board, by acting as Bev at a hearing. This is the point of no return for the twins. Eliot admits to Bev that he doesn’t think the board bought it; that in fact they knew it was him and not Bev.

After this, both Bev and Eliot become addicted to pills and spend much of their time in their increasingly disgusting apartment. Claire gets back from her business trip and gets a hold of Bev, who has been locked into the apartment by Eliot. She explains that she didn’t have an affair with anyone and Bev goes to see her, hoping to get more pills. After a night together, Bev tells her that he must go see Eliot. She begs him not to, saying that Eliot won’t let him go. Once back at the apartment, the viewer sees what a mess their apartment is, a very stark difference from the obsessively pristine state it was in at the beginning of the film.

Bev asked Eliot why he was trying so hard to help him, at one point in the film. Eliot made Bev tell the story of two Siamese twins: when one died of a stroke, the other woke up and died of shock at seeing his dead twin. At the end of the film, Bev kills Eliot with his tools while in a dream state, stating that he was going to separate them. When Bev wakes up to see Eliot dead, he runs out to call Claire. This represented a moment in which Bev tried to live his life without Eliot. Claire answered and asked who it was, but Bev couldn’t answer. Instead he went back upstairs with Eliot, and killed himself or died due to shock.

This film worked so well because each scene seemed important. Even the color scheme was significant. Whenever we are in the twins apartment or their offices, and other places that have to do with their work, the colors are grey and dull. The only exception is in the operating room when all the physicians and nurses are dressed in red scrubs. The color red is the warmest color on the color wheel, and stands out in contrast to the very cold color palette of the rest of the spaces they inhabit. The colors are also a bit warmer and brighter in Claire’s apartment, which is the only other place we see the twins spend time.

What I take away from this film is that, I would like to be able to make every part of my film important. I don’t want the audience to see any scene as a throwaway scene, or see any camera angle or editing choice as being superfluous or random.

DOGTOOTH

The protagonists in the film are three siblings, in their late teens/early twenties, who have been kept in the confines of a large fence surrounding their home by their dictator like father. The story follows them through their days of learning made up facts about the world from their mother, and playing violent competitive games with each other like seeing who will wake up fastest after huffing anesthesia.

Their dominating father and submissive mother are the antagonists of the film. They make their children believe that if they leave the compound, they will die. The father tells them that only when one of their canine teeth has fallen out, are they finally adults and ready to go out into the world. He also tells them the only way to be safe when venturing out past the walls, they must take the car and they are only ready to drive when the canine tooth grows back. It’s clear they do not want their children to ever become adults and leave their domain. One of the themes of the film is the ridiculousness of the measure parents will take to control their children.

They go to great lengths to hide and distort the world beyond their walls in order to keep their children innocent and completely under their authority. The mother makes them listen to a tape of her giving fake definitions of real words and using them in sentences. For instance she tells them that the *sea* is a leather chair. They also make the children believe that Frank Sinatra is their grandfather. They play the song *Fly Me to the Moon*, and the father translates the words incorrectly to the children. When the father brings home supplies from the outside, like bottled water, he removes all the brand names. They even make up a fake older brother who was kicked out of the home for disobeying the family rules, in order to further keep the children scared. Another theme of the film is a commentary of the pitfalls of home schooling. The main intent of the mother in misguiding her children, may be to further warp whatever meaning of the world the children may have made on their own, but these incorrect definitions at as a caricature of what the home school does.

The parents’ deep paranoia and fear of the uncontrollable nature of the outside world seem to be driving their extreme and unethical behavior. The father is constantly reminding the children of the dangers of the outside world, although he has a job and goes into the outside world, his interactions with people are limited. The lengthiest interaction he has with anyone other than his family is with a man who he’s paid to train his dog. He goes to get the dog, and when told by the trainer that the dog is not ready to be taken home, there’s a sense of distrust and the father is taken to see the dog anyway. When the dog doesn’t respond to the father’s calls, he becomes increasingly angry. Horror at the unpredictability of the world, is another theme explored in the film.

The main conflict comes from the one person the father has allowed to come into the home, ironically proving the fathers anxiety about the outside world. A woman security guard, who works at the fathers’ place of business, had been hired by the father to have sex with the son. One day she tells the oldest daughter that she would give the girl her headband if the girl would perform oral sex on her. After this happens, the oldest daughter becomes even more rebellious and aggressive than before. Her curiosity with the outside grows stronger and she asks more questions. Her angst towards her brother also heightens, and after a fight over who should play with a model plane, she cuts the brothers arm with a knife.

The security guard tries to barter with the oldest daughter for oral sex another time, and the oldest daughter demands she be given some videotapes the woman has. Once the oldest daughter watches the videos, her character transforms and her resolve to get out becomes solidified. After getting in trouble for her imitation of the dance from *Flashdance* at her parents anniversary dinner party, she attempts to leave the house by knocking out her canine tooth.

There are several themes in the film, as discussed. An over arching theme is the ugliness of an authoritarianism. The children are not allowed, essentially, to grow up and explore their desires. The result of this is the constant feeling one of them is going to hurt themselves or one of the other siblings. The children repressed to a perilous and hopeless point. The end of the film exemplifies this by leaving the viewer unsure if the oldest daughter actually escaped the compound, or got into the trunk of the car where after so long without access to oxygen, she would have died.

The film plays out in a very art-house fashion, with experimental and visually interesting shots. The shots seem to be essential to the story, as much of the time when something is happening it is not in full view of the camera. This distorted view the audience is presented, is in line with the skewed version of the world the parents offer their children. There are comedic moments in the film, like when the oldest daughter asks what *pussy* means after seeing the word on one of her parents’ private videos. All the characters have rather expressionless faces on throughout the film, which give it a very dramatic feel as well.

I thought the characters were very human but not very relatable. It’s hard for me to imagine a world in which I would be so trusting of my parents that I would not question their authority. However, the oldest daughter was the most relatable because she possessed the strongest sense of desire to know more about life beyond the family walls. The younger sister and brother come across as almost puppet like or robotic in their words and actions. Still, it wasn’t hard to feel sympathy for the characters for all three of the siblings.

This film created an entire world that was dysfunctional and horrific, and also very believable. It was not difficult to fall into the reality of the characters. I would like to try to emulate this kind of authenticity in my writing, when creating the setting of my story. The way the characters behaved and reacted to things, made sense considering the situation they were placed in. When creating a world different from the one people are used to, it is important to make sure things are still logical.

THE DREAMERS

The protagonists in the film are two twins Isabelle and Theo, and their new friend Matthew. They meet at a protest over the firing of Henri Langlois, outside of the Cinematheque Francoise. All three of them are movie buffs and their passion for cinema and politics connects them instantly.

Isabelle and Theo have an incestuous type relationship, though they have never actually had sex with each other. Matthew discovers this one night when he is staying in their guest bedroom. He walks by Theo’s room to see the two of them sleeping next to each other naked. The first conflict happens when Isabelle plays a game with Theo in which, he has to guess what film she is referencing in her dance, or else he must forfeit and pay the price. When he forfeits, Isabelle tells him to masturbate in front of her and Matthew. Matthew brings up the strange nature of the twins relationship to Theo after this scene.

This spurs the second conflict, in which after Isabelle and Matthew lose the game to Theo, he tells them he wants them to have sex in front of him. After some resistance from Matthew, the two eventually comply and we learn that it was Isabelle’s first time having sex. This spurs closeness between Matthew and Isabelle, as they enjoy their newfound love, leaving Theo out. An equilibrium is restored for a while and the three enjoy each other in more intimate ways, bathing together and stating their love for each other.

Then the twins try to play a new game with Matthew, telling him to prove his love by allowing them to shave his pubic hair. Matthew becomes enraged and tells them that they’ll never grow if they don’t stop being together all the time. He insists that Isabelle go out on a date with him alone, and this sparks the final breaking point in the film. Isabelle and Matthew have a wonderful date and things seem to be going smoothly. As the two kiss outside of a electronics store, news of violent protests play on a television, like an omen of disasters to come.

When the two return home, it’s implied that Theo has a woman some woman company over. This noticeably bothers Isabelle, but Matthew tries to distract her and insists against her protests that they spend the night in her room. All seems fine, when suddenly Theo begins playing music in his room loudly, perhaps as a way to block out the noise he and his lady friend were going to make. This causes Isabelle to breakdown, and she desperately tries to get Theo to open his door. After this, the twins’ parents return from Holiday temporarily, because they were unable to reach them by telephone. The twins had neglected to take care of the house, and their parents are shocked to find the house a mess. Their greatest shock, though, was to find the twins and Matthew sleeping naked together in a fort Isabelle made in the living room. The parents leave a check for their children and silently leave without waking them.

At the beginning of the movie, Isabelle told Matthew if her parents ever found out about Theo and her, she would kill herself. When Isabelle wakes up to find the check, she becomes panicked, thinking about her parents seeing them how they were. She attempts to commit suicide with the boys, by filtering gas from the kitchen into the fort with a hose. Suddenly, a brick is thrown into the living room from the street, as a riot has formed outside. This pulls Matthew and the twins apart. Theo wants to fight and be apart of the violence, while Matthew insists that violence is not the answer.

There are many themes in the movie, but one I followed most was the concept of fantasy. The twins are constantly playing out scenes from their favorite films, and playing sadomasochistic games with each other. They do everything together and have managed to keep their relationship hidden from their parents. Theo tells Matthew at one point that he and Isabelle share the same brain; that they are Siamese twins. They were living one fantasy. Only when they bring in Matthew, an outsider, do things begin to deteriorate in their world. After the entrance of Matthew as a constant presence in their home do they each become intimate with someone different, do their parents discover their relationship and it all ends in a giant riot with Theo throwing a Molotov cocktail into a police brigade.

The film feels like a drama. Matthew narrates the entire film, and the characters are consistently in situations that test their levels of comfort. The dialogue is very intense, with the bulk of it dealing with the differences in political ideals between Matthew and Theo. During conversations between characters, there are often cutaways to each character in the room, to bring attention to how each of them is processing the discussion. This also adds a dramatic effect to the film.

I found the characters relatable, although because much of their personalities were presented to the audience through Matthews point of view, he was the most three dimensional character. The film ended with me unsure of whether or not I really knew who Isabelle and Theo were, or I was just given a representation of Matthew’s fantasy of them. The two start of as caricatures of young French artists, constantly smoking cigarettes, speaking in metaphors, and behaving in mysterious or random ways.

Something I took away from this film is that when making characters, it’s important to write each of them from their individual points of view. Perhaps Gilbert Adair purposefully wrote the characters mostly from Matthews point of view, because the movie was more about Matthew living out his fantasy and seeing it fall apart when the twins turn out to be different than his vision of them. But, this was a little frustrating for me.

THE HOUSE OF YES

The protagonist in this movie is Jackie-O Pascal, who recently returned home to live with her mother and younger brother, Anthony, after being in a mental institution. It’s thanksgiving and her twin brother, Marty, who moved away shortly after she was admitted, is coming home for a visit. The conflict is that Marty is bringing his fiancé, and Jackie-O is still in love with Marty since their relationship became sexual when they were kids.

This movie is a dark-comedy, apparent by it’s grim story and frequent zingers. The dialogue moves quickly, and Jackie’s erratic and nonsensical behavior, are a part of what gives the movie its comedic feel. The mother’s cold, monotonous tone coupled with her ridiculous language and one-liners, are another comedic element.

The lighting is always dim, unlike a pure comedy movie, which gives off an ominous vibe and keeps the viewer in a state of suspense. This effect adds to the story, as it becomes clear Jackie’s obsession with her brother has caused violent consequences in the past, and probably will again. Anthony tells Marty’s fiancé, Lesly, whom he has fallen in love with, that Marty and Jackie are in love with each other. It comes to light through Anthony’s confession that Jackie was put in a mental facility after shooting Marty when he brought a romantic interest home.

Lesly catches Jackie and Marty having sex in the living room. Another conflict is sparked here, as Lesly has sex with Anthony while in a state of shock at what she has seen. The mother sees Lesly and Anthony, and threatens Lesly with telling Marty about it, if she doesn’t leave the house immediately. This causes an unlikely glimmer of hope in the story. Lesly attempts to get leave the house with Marty, so the mother demands Anthony tell Marty what happened with Lesly. Jackie is pleased with this, believing Marty will force Lesly to leave and be with her instead. This is not what happens. Marty tells everyone but Lesly to leave, and asks Lesly to remind him of their relationship together. Lesly begins to tell Marty about what they do on a Sunday, and a montage of the couple being happy plays out.

Meanwhile Jackie is having a breakdown, as she feels she’s losing her brother/lover. She finds the gun, which had been hidden from her, and shoots Marty just before he is about to leave with Lesly. The theme of this movie to me is the severe and sometimes unhealthy hold our family has on us, or how we can make our family so absurdly important. The conflict arises when Marty comes back into the home, and the breaking point occurs when he tries to leave.

There’s also the theme of being a product of your past no matter how hard you try. The mother often asks Marty why he would leave his sister and questioned his love for Lesly. Marty’s response was that he left to try and have a normal life, and that he wanted to be with Lesly not just because he loved her but to achieve a degree of normalcy. His mother’s response was that they were never normal and he could never be normal. This also points to the theme of your past always being apart of you.

The film worked, mostly because of the wonderful acting done by Parker Posey who played Jackie-O. The rest of characters were poorly casted to me, and lacked chemistry. The dialogue also made the film seem more like a cult movie more than anything. It was very quirky and at times felt unnatural. This is something I really need to pay attention to when writing my script. I want to make sure that the dialogue sounds as if it would really be something the person would say.