

## *Match Point*

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### **Abstract**

While Woody Allen is generally considered to be a comedian and a writer-director of comedic movies, he also has a more serious, philosophic side. One movie that explores his serious side is the 2005 film *Match Point*. Woody Allen's worldview, as presented in *Match Point*, is basically nihilistic: life has no intrinsic meaning, value, or purpose. In this film, Woody Allen's nihilism is embodied in the actions and events affecting the life of the central character, Chris Wilton. In this paper I pose the question as to the limits of Woody Allen's nihilism as expressed in this film. Does nihilism extend, in fact, all the way to the characters' perceptions of the world? I examine the character Chris Wilton to try to find the answer to this question.

**Key Words** : cinema, film noir, Woody Allen

### **INTRODUCTION**

Because Woody Allen's early films are about as funny as any ever made, it is often assumed that his temperament is essentially comic, which leads to all manner of disappointment and misunderstanding. Now and then, Mr. Allen tries to clear up the confusion, insisting, sometimes elegantly and sometimes a little too baldly, that his view of the world is essentially nihilistic. He has announced, in movie after movie, an absolute lack of faith in any ordering moral principle in the universe— and still, people think he's joking. (Scott, "*Match Point*", *New York Times*, December 28, 2005)

Two Woody Allen movies that illustrate the worldview mentioned above are *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point*. One might be forgiven for being confused—as in the quotation above, to “think he's joking”—about the message in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* since the moral theme of the movie is diluted by a comedic sub-plot.<sup>(1)</sup> Such is not the case with *Match Point*: the film is stripped of potentially distracting elements and, because of this, it offers up a purer, more accessible representation of its theme.

Woody Allen's 1989 film *Crimes and Misdemeanors* can be considered in many ways a first draft or trial run for his later, 2005 film *Match Point*. They have similar plots and themes: adultery and murder in a meaningless universe. *Match Point*, however, is a distillation of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* in that it takes away some of the elements of the earlier movie, while at the same time honing the overall theme.

*Crimes and Misdemeanors* tells the story of Judah Rosenthal, a successful, married Jewish ophthalmologist who finds himself inconvenienced by his lover's demand that he leave his wife. After much 'soul-searching' he asks his gangster brother to "get rid of the problem." His brother complies, but after the deed is done, Judah goes through a long period of guilt, regret, and remorse, punctuated by visions of his long-dead Jewish father sitting in judgment over his actions. Judah becomes convinced that he must suffer retribution for his crimes. As time passes, however, there is no retribution and gradually the intensity of Judah's feelings and forebodings lessens. By the end of the film, he is prospering even more than before the murder, and his past actions elicit little more than an occasional twinge of his conscience. Added to the main story line is a seemingly gratuitous comic sub-plot involving a documentary filmmaker, played by Woody Allen, and his unfulfilled yearnings for a production assistant, played by Mia Farrow. This comic sub-plot does little more than distract from the central theme of the movie.

When stripped to its essentials (i.e., by ignoring the comedic sub-plot), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* reflects the nihilism mentioned in the quotation above. In a meaningless universe, a heinous deed such as murder can go unpunished (or even rewarded), and religiously inspired guilt can lose its sting with time. However, the central message is somewhat muddled by the inclusion of religion and comedy.

*Match Point*, on the other hand, does away with both religion and a comic sub-plot as elements in the film. What we are left with is a much clearer, more forceful statement of nihilism, and, to underscore the complete fickle randomness of existence, Woody Allen introduces the concept of luck as a major determiner of one's fate. On first blush, it would seem that Woody Allen has concluded that human lives are devoid of meaning and completely subject to the whimsy of an uncaring universe. Is his message entirely negative? Is there some small redeeming aspect in life as depicted in the movie? It is the purpose of this paper to find out the answers to these questions by examining the events and characters in *Match Point*.

## ***Match Point***

### **The Setting**

Known as the consummate New York filmmaker, for *Match Point* Woody Allen chose to cross the Atlantic to make his first film in the UK.<sup>(2)</sup> The story takes place in modern day London. It is an immaculate, cultured London, the London of the upper classes, and, because of this, the characters in the movie are either upper class or upper class wannabes. The film encompasses a virtual tour of London's art, culture, and history by featuring a plethora of well-known London sites such as the Tate Modern Art Gallery, Norman Foster's "Gherkin", Richard Rogers' Lloyd's building, the Royal Opera House, the Palace of Westminster, Blackfriars Bridge and Cambridge Circus. The operatic music of the film underscores the sense of refined elegance.<sup>(3)</sup> Woody Allen's London is far from realistic: there is no dirt or grime, there are no homeless people, and, or so it would seem, there is nothing improper. Even when people argue, they do so politely.

On the surface, then, the world of *Match Point* would appear to be almost idyllic—at least to anyone interested in a 'cultured' life. Turning to the characters, though, we can see that all may not be as it first appears.

### **The Characters**

As mentioned above, all of the main characters are either upper class or aspiring to join the upper class.<sup>(4)</sup>

*Chris Wilton* comes from the Irish lower classes. Through luck and effort, he has become a rather successful professional tennis player. Having tired of life on the professional tennis circuit (and perhaps more importantly, having sensed his limited possibilities for real success on the circuit), he has come to London to teach tennis at an exclusive London tennis club. His real purpose in coming to London, however, is to look for opportunities to advance himself. To do this, he prepares himself to blend in with the upper classes by nurturing an interest in 'culture'—he listens to opera, reads literary classics, and replaces his lower class Irish accent with a more standard way of talking. Chris is not all pretence, however. He is a hard worker with a quick mind who thinks well on his feet.

*Nola Rice* is a rather untalented, unconfident, struggling actress from Boulder, Colorado. She, too, is from the lower classes and her greatest fear seems to be that she might have to return to America without having succeeded as an actress. She is quite attractive—she

describes herself as 'sexy' rather than 'beautiful'—and has a history of failed relationships.

Just as the London of *Match Point* is quite one-dimensional, so too are the *Hewetts*. They are essentially a caricature of an upper class family in the UK. The father, *Alec*, is a very successful businessman who is living the good life. He has both a city home and a country estate complete with stables. He hunts, is a patron of the arts, and does his best to spoil his children. The mother, *Eleanor*, drinks too much and dotes on her children. What she desires most out of life in to become a grandmother. Son *Tom* is somewhat of a playboy. He has no apparent occupation and spends most of his time finding ways to enjoy himself. Daughter *Chloe* is a hopelessly spoiled Pollyanna with a history of bad choices when it comes to men.

### The Theme

As already mentioned, the principal theme of *Match Point* is nihilistic: life has no intrinsic meaning, value, or purpose. More so than in earlier movies that have dealt with nihilism (such as *Crimes and Misdemeanors*), in *Match Point* Woody Allen basically ignores such issues as religious angst in an effort to present a non-embellished version of his nihilistic theme. Moreover, he stresses the central part that luck plays in determining one's fate.

On a cursory viewing of the film, one could be forgiven for reducing the film's message to this: "Since life has no meaning, and we are subject to the whims of fate, it doesn't matter what we do since we can't affect the outcome anyway." A corollary of this would be that there is nothing to be gained by making an effort. I would argue, however, that the actions of Chris Wilton speak against this point. Through the events in Chris's life, we can see that effort and luck are both important. In the next part of this paper, I'll examine the way in which these two forces, *effort* and *luck*, come into play for Chris.

### The Story

THE SCENE IS A TENNIS COURT. NOTHING IS VISIBLE BUT A NET AND A BALL FLYING BACK AND FORTH OVER THE NET. NARRATION BEGINS: The man who said, 'I'd rather be lucky than good,' saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It's scary to think how much is out of one's control. There are moments in a match when the ball hits the top of the net [HERE THE BALL HITS THE TOP OF THE NET] and for a split second it can either go forward or fall back. [HERE THE BALL FREEZES IN MID-AIR DIRECTLY OVER THE NET] With a little luck it goes forward . . .

and you win. Or maybe it doesn't . . . and you lose. [BALL STILL IN SUSPENSION OVER THE NET]

*Comment: The opening clearly introduces the concept of **luck** as a determining factor in the outcome of life. Obviously, since the metaphor used is a tennis game, it's reasonable to assume that the opening refers to Chris the tennis pro. It's even more reasonable when we later recognize the voice of the narrator to be Chris's.*

Chris Wilton, the young Irish tennis pro who has tired of life on the professional tennis circuit, arrives in London to take an instructor's position at an exclusive tennis club. He finds an apartment and settles into a rather monotonous, solitary life. By day he lobs tennis balls to various members of London's elite, and by night he eats alone and whiles away his time by reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (while frequently referring to critics' notes) and listening to opera.

*Comment: Chris's goal is to improve his lot in life through making contact with London's upper classes and seeing what opportunities might arise from that contact. Chris's attempt to 'better' himself by reading classic literature and listening to opera is part of his **effort** to equip himself to deal with the upper classes.*

One day Tom Hewett, the son of a very successful businessman, comes to the club to take tennis lessons from Chris. In spite of their obvious class differences, they immediately hit it off, and, when Tom learns of Chris's interest in opera, he invites him to come share the family's box at the opera. Chris is pleased to be invited but, to make a point of independence, insists on paying for his own ticket.

*Comment: Chris's **efforts** are bearing fruit since his interest in opera is the key to his establishing a relationship with Tom. Chris makes sure that Tom knows of his interest in opera by asking for advice about where he can buy an opera CD. Chris's insistence that he pay for his own ticket is clearly an **effort** to show Tom that he is not a common freeloader.*

At the opera Chris meets Tom's sister Chloe, who shows an interest in Chris right away. She wastes no time in inviting him to the Hewett's country estate for the weekend. After playing tennis with Chloe at the estate, Chris talks of his humble beginnings and intimates that he doesn't want to be a tennis instructor forever, "I'd like to do something with my life.

You know, special. I'd like to make a contribution." When he talks of his love of art, Chloe jumps at the chance to be his guide to London's art world. Chris accepts her offer to show him the London art world but again insists on paying for his own tickets.

*Comment: Again, Chris cleverly goes about advancing his cause. He talks about his past and his ambitions for the future. Certainly he thinks that Chloe or her family might help him. He mentions art so that he will have an opportunity to continue seeing Chloe. Of course, once again he establishes his independence by insisting that he will pay for his tickets to art galleries and museums. He clearly makes a concerted **effort** to play it cool to prevent any of the Hewetts from viewing him as a gold-digger.*

Everything seems to be going well for Chris. The fact that he has made acquaintances within the upper class bodes well for his ambitions. As Chris wanders through the tastefully luxurious Hewett mansion, we can plainly see both his appreciation of and desire for just such a lifestyle. Perhaps Chloe is his ticket to just such a life. However, here enters a complication: a *femme fatale*. As Chris walks down a corridor, he hears the sounds of a table tennis match. Upon investigation, Chris finds a game room where a man and woman are just finishing a match. The man leaves in defeat, and the woman offers Chris a highly suggestive challenge, "So, who's my next victim." In dialogue reminiscent of the famous 'speeding' conversation by Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, Chris and the woman (Nola Rice), exchange sexually provocative banter. At this point Tom enters the room, and we discover that Nola, a struggling actress from the United States, is Tom's fiancée. Even so, Chris is obviously attracted to her.

*Comment: Here **luck** steps in and presents a possible obstacle to Chris's successful future. His attraction towards Nola could certainly affect any future relationship with Tom and/or Chloe. In some sense, the rest of the movie consists of the playing out of conflicting influences of two forces in Chris's life: (1) his ambition to be socially and financially successful and (2) his primal attraction for Nola Rice.*

Over the weeks, Chris and Chloe visit galleries and attend afternoon showings of 'art' movies. While it's clear that Chloe begins to care for Chris, Chris's reciprocation seems somewhat *pro forma*. Nonetheless, they become lovers. Chris is careful to cultivate his relationship with Chloe's parents. When his efforts succeed and Chloe's parents express their approval of Chris, Chloe approaches her father to see if he can offer Chris a job in one of his

companies. When a position becomes available, Chris accepts. As he settles into the work, Chloe's father begins to groom him for a quick promotion.

*Comment: Even though it is clear from our viewpoint that Chloe's feelings for Chris are not reciprocated, Chris enters into a relationship with her. It is the classic play of a gold-digger or gigolo, but he manages the relationship so well that he succeeds in ingratiating himself with Chloe's parents.*

Although Chris and Chloe's relationship seems to be going well, whenever they meet Tom and Nola, it's apparent that Chris is strongly attracted to Nola. One day Nola meets Chris by chance on her way to an audition, and afterwards they have a drink together. Nola makes it clear that her feelings for Tom are mainly based on an attraction to the lifestyle that marrying Tom would offer. Chris begins to make a pass at Nola. Nola doesn't encourage Chris, but her rejection of him is rather half-hearted.

*Comment: Here we see that Nola is, in fact, a female version of Chris, a person who might marry into success. The main difference between them, however, is that she depends on her beauty, rather than on calculated **effort**, to help her succeed. Perhaps because of her lack of **effort**, **luck** is not kind to her.*

On a hunting weekend at the Hewetts' country estate, Nola becomes upset when Mrs. Hewett (Eleanor) presses her about her lack of success in her acting career. Miffed, Nola goes for a walk in the rain. Chris follows and makes love to her. When Chris and Nola meet in public after that weekend, Nola insists that their lovemaking was just a one-time, spur-of-the-moment affair, but this just fans the flames of Chris's desire.

*Comment: A **chance** meeting with Nola on the street provides the impetus for Chris's infidelity, and a **chance** argument between Nola and Eleanor set the scene for Chris and Nola's lovemaking.*

In spite of his feelings for Nola, Chris follows through and goes ahead with his marriage to Chloe. Subsidized by Chloe's father, they move into a large London apartment. Chloe's immediate desire is to have children.

*Comment: Chris makes the **effort** to return to his plan. He resists his desire for Nola*

*and marries Chloe.*

Soon after Chris and Chloe marry, Tom confesses to Chris that he has broken up with Nola. Still attracted to Nola, Chris immediately tries to contact Nola by going to her apartment but discovers she has left London.

**Comment:** *In spite of the fact that Chris is married to Chloe, only the fact that Nola has left London prevents him from pursuing a relationship with her.*

Over the next few months, Chloe tries unsuccessfully to get pregnant. Chris begins to feel the stress and pressure of their attempts to get her pregnant. They visit many specialists but are always told that there is nothing physically wrong with either of them. According to the specialists, Nola will probably get pregnant with a combination of time, patience, and luck. To add insult to injury, Tom marries his already pregnant girlfriend—the girl he had left Nola for.

**Comment:** *The bad **luck** of not being able to conceive a child begins to put pressure on Chloe and Chris's marriage.*

One day Chris meets Nola by chance in an art gallery. She is back in London after returning from the United States. Since Chris is still married, Nola is far from enthusiastic about seeing him, but he manages to get her to tell him her phone number. That is all Chris needs. They soon start a torrid affair.

**Comment:** *Again **luck** enters the picture when Chris comes upon Nola in the art gallery, but it is Chris's persistent **effort** to get her number that allows the **luck** to bear fruit.*

Soon, though, Nola begins to weary of her position as the 'other woman'. Chris hints that he may leave Chloe, but as the seasons pass, the situation stays the same. Chloe is still not pregnant, and Chris still sneaks away several afternoons a week to meet Nola. He continues to make vague promises about leaving Chloe.

When Nola tells Chris she is pregnant, however, Chris can delay no longer. He must do something. He considers several choices. He could leave Chloe, but, as he admits to a friend, he has become very attached to his new lifestyle. He could pay for an abortion, but Nola seems to be dead set against that. (Nola: "Chris, I expect you to do the right thing! I'm not walking



away from this!") He could somehow get rid of Nola. He tries to put off a decision, but, when Nola threatens to go directly to Chloe, Chris decides he can wait no longer.

*Comment: The bad **luck** of Nola's pregnancy produces the crisis that will determine Chris's fate. If he is passive and makes no **effort**, his life will be determined for him.*

Chris carefully sets about to murder Nola and make it appear as though she were killed in a burglary attempt. He steals one of the hunting guns from the Hewett estate and enters the apartment of an old woman who lives across the hall from Nola. After he shoots the old woman, he rifles through her apartment, stealing all the medicines and valuables he can find. Then he waits for Nola to come home. He shoots her dead from across the hallway. After the murder, he returns the gun to the Hewett estate. He then goes to a river in London and throws the stolen articles into it. As he walks away, he discovers the old lady's wedding ring in his pocket, quickly turns, and throws it towards the river. Without stopping to see what happens to the ring, Chris hurries away. Echoing the opening scene of the movie (when a tennis ball hits the top of the net and stops, suspended in air over the net), the ring, in slow motion, strikes the top of the fence, bounces straight up, and then falls onto the walkway on the land side of the fence. It would seem that luck has taken a turn against Chris.

*Comment: In a supremely amoral act, Chris attempts to take control of his life by murdering Nola. He does his best to make Nola's murder appear to be the unplanned result of a burglary at her neighbors. The fact that the wedding ring falls on the shore seems to suggest that **luck** may have turned against Chris.*

On the same morning that Chris returns the gun to the gunroom on the Hewett estate, he and Chloe announce to her parents that they are finally going to have a baby. Both Alec and Eleanor are overjoyed.

*Comment: A counterpoint to the apparent bad **luck** of the falling wedding ring is the good **luck** of Chloe's pregnancy.*

At first, the police analysis falls into line with Chris's intentions. They think that the deaths are the result of a drug burglary gone bad. That changes, however, when the police discover Nola's diary filled with the details of her affair with Chris. Chris is brought in for questioning. At first he denies having a relationship with Nola, but, when confronted with the

diary, he admits the affair. He insists, however, that he had nothing to do with the murder and begs the police not to tell his family about the affair.

**Comment:** *Unluckily for Chris, Nola had kept a diary. Through it Chris's affair with Nola is revealed and he becomes a murder suspect.*

The available evidence supports the idea that the murders were drug-related offenses, but, in spite of that, the chief investigating officer, as the result of a midnight epiphany, becomes convinced that Chris is the culprit. When he announces this to his subordinate the next morning, he is told that the old lady's wedding ring has been found on a known drug user who has just been killed "in a drug deal turned nasty." Not completely convinced, the senior officer reluctantly gives up his investigation of Chris.

**Comment:** *In an ironic twist, the ring that had by **luck** fallen inside the fence (metaphorically, on Chris's side of the tennis court—Lost point! Lost game! Lost match!) is found by a junkie. As a result, Chris is able to get away with Nola's murder.*

The final scene of the movie takes place a few months later as Chris, Chloe, Alec, Eleanor and Tom and his wife arrive at Chris and Chloe's apartment to celebrate the homecoming of Chris and Chloe's newborn son. As the women fuss over the new arrival, Alec raises a glass of champagne and proposes a toast:

**Alec:** "To Terence Elliot Wilton. With parents like Chloe and Chris, this child will be great with anything he sets his mind to."

**Tom:** "You know—I don't care if he's great. I just hope that he's lucky."

The scene ends with a shot of the successful new father gazing contentedly out the window.

**Comment:** *The toast in the final scene offers a none-too-subtle restatement of the idea that **luck** is one of the major determining factors in life.*

## Conclusion

The actions and events of Chris Wilton's life define the world of *Match Point*. Here are major aspects of this world:

- Happiness and success are defined by **wealth** and **family**. The Hewetts are portrayed as essentially happy. They are wealthy and enjoy the privileges of that wealth: they live in luxury, attending the opera, endowing art galleries, keeping a stable of horses, hunting, etc. They are a tight-knit family. Alec and Eleanor's goal for their children is to see them happily married with children. Chloe's main goal for herself seems to be to marry and have children.
- It is a **nihilistic** (amoral) world. A person succeeds or fails irrespective of any morality. Some characters—Chloe, Alec, and Eleanor, for example—seem to live morally exemplary lives. Tom, however, gets Nola pregnant, forces her to have an abortion, dumps her, and then goes on to have a seemingly happy marriage. Chris marries a woman he doesn't love, has an affair with Nola, murders her, and then lives happily ever after. It is amoral rather than immoral.
- **Religion** is unimportant. Since this world is amoral, religion plays no great part. The only appearance of religion is at wedding ceremonies. Unlike in the film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, no one in *Match Point* fears religious retribution. At no point does Chris pray for forgiveness or worry about eternal damnation; he simply worries about getting arrested and convicted for his crimes.
- **Luck** and **effort** are major determiners in life. In the end, luck may be the final determiner, but effort prepares the groundwork necessary for luck to enter into the picture. Without Chris's effort, the final bit of luck—the ring falling inside the fence and a junkie finding it—could never have happened.

To return to the concerns mentioned in the introduction to this paper:

*. . . it would seem that Woody Allen has concluded that human lives are devoid of meaning and completely subject to the whimsy of an uncaring universe. Is his message entirely negative? Is there some small redeeming aspect in life as depicted in the movie?*

My conclusion is that the world of *Match Point* is bleak, but not as bleak as the above quotation suggests. Woody Allen's message is basically negative: human lives *are* devoid of any intrinsic value and *are* greatly influenced/determined by blind chance. Even if people

cannot find an ultimate meaning to life, however, they can perhaps find happiness through family and material comfort. And they can, perhaps, through effort, affect the course of their lives so that they have a better chance of arriving at this happiness.

### **[Notes]**

- (1) Some critics, however, argue that the inclusion of the dramatic and comedic elements is the touch of a master, reminiscent of Bergman at his best. (See Brode, 1992, 272.)
- (2) The film was originally to have been shot in the Hamptons.
- (3) Opera connoisseurs have noted that the arias and opera extracts make an ironic commentary on the actions of the characters and sometimes foreshadow developments in the movie's narrative. (See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Match\\_Point](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Match_Point).)
- (4) While the film is vague on the point, it seems that we are dealing with an economic—opposed to a titled—upper class.

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