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Why *Nebraska* is a Quintessential Movie About the American Midwest

Joshua Matthews

This essay is one in a sequence of Matthews’ Great-Movie Essays of the 2000s. All pictures from the film *Nebraska* (2013)—written by Bob Nelson, directed by Alexander Payne, produced by Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa, with music by Mark Orton, and starring Bruce Dern, Will Forte, June Squibb, and Bob Odenkirk—are the property of Paramount Pictures.

In the early twenty-first century, what is middle America, and what should you think about it? So asks the 2013 movie *Nebraska*, one of the best American movies of the 21st century, partly because it will challenge your view of Midwestern Americans as being too simple and too narrow, no matter what your view of the Midwest is.

*Nebraska* plays off common stereotypes of rural and countrified Americans and the real demographic changes happening to rural America. For some, Nebraska is “flyover country.” It’s a barren landscape full of simple people. It’s also slowly dying out; the rural population is migrating to suburban and urban areas, and its population is aging. Where I live in rural Iowa, towns of 1000 people have shrunk down into the hundreds, and a majority of their residents are senior citizens. It’s not uncommon in these towns to see several old-folks’ homes, and yet you’ll see few people in their teens and twenties.

The worst characterizations of rural American places like Nebraska are well-known to nearly everyone in the U.S. They’re supposedly filled with podunk, red-state rednecks, full of gun-toting, hyper-religious, mouth-breathing Joe Six-Pack-types—the kinds of things that, as a small-town Hoosier boy, have been hearing for decades. In this view, “simple” is really the opposite of urban and cosmopolitan: it tends to mean out-of-touch, low-IQ, and even uncivilized.

The film’s main character, Woody Grant, as his name suggests, represents some of these common associations with Nebraska. Like the semi-senile Woody, *Nebraska* features empty plains peppered by small towns that, because of demographic changes, are suffering from “brain drain.”

The movie’s clear association between Woody Grant and Nebraska itself might be a damning one for the proud state, given Woody’s overall condition. He’s old, pathetic, and delusional. For most of the movie, he wears a bandage on his head, as if to showcase how hurt or broken his mind is, a potential metaphor for his own personal “brain drain,” as well as for the social phenomenon occurring in middle America. Late in the movie,
one character asks if he has Alzheimer’s. “No,” Woody’s son David responds, “he just believes stuff that people tell him.”

As a lifelong Midwesterner, I take David’s comment as a potent observation applicable to the older family members and neighbors I’ve known. It’s a statement on the gullibility of Midwesterners such as Woody, who tend to be too nice, naïve, and guileless. Because middle America is becoming older, maybe it’s also more senile.

Looked at in this way, the movie partly condemns Nebraska as an aging and dying land of depression. Senility, failure, lack of communication, boredom, buried anger, family envy, and the desire to forget—all of these the movie seems to be associating with the state that is also the title of the movie, and with, as I am tentatively suggesting, all of rural middle-America itself.

In the main plot of Nebraska, Woody returns to his childhood and early-adult home of Hawthorne, Nebraska, reuniting with his extended family and old acquaintances. Decades ago, Woody and his family left the dying hometown he and Kate Grant (his wife) were born in. Living now in Billings, Montana, the Grant family has disassociated itself from Nebraska.

The movie is therefore not just about what Nebraska is like, but also about what returning to Nebraska, or even any American small town with which you have been associated, is like. It is about recollecting your past in that town. For Woody, that recollection is, for the most part, painful.

Although Hawthorne is a potent fictional name in the film’s own context—it’s associated with the invasive plant that heals as an herb and annoys as a weed, as well as with the famous American author, Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of whose great themes is the unavoidability of painful memories of the recent and distant past—the movie was shot on location in a rural Nebraska town.

That town is the aptly named Plainview, Nebraska. As the Plainview website proudly boasts, director Alexander Payne (who himself hails from Omaha) barely changed anything about the town. “I want to get things just as they are,” Payne has said. “So in this movie, Nebraska, really very little is changed from how it naturally occurs. The town of Plainview, Nebraska is exactly as shown,” except for two small locations, the newspaper office and the tanning salon. In many ways the movie seems realistic, and in some cases the actors seem to be townsfolk who just wandered onto the set.

The main plot advances because of a scam. Woody believes he’s won $1,000,000 via a direct-mail magazine sweepstakes contest. He thereby tries to act on a version of the American Dream: he believes he can get rich quick. He will not stop leaving the house and walking down the road, headed from Billings, Montana to Lincoln, Nebraska because he wants his “million dollars.”

Three times he begins this journey before his son David gives in. Woody can’t be talked out of his delusion, so David must drive him to Lincoln to show his dad that he’s believing in a scam. Thus begins a buddy-road-trip story involving a father-son pair who can barely communicate and whose wounds are as broad as the Nebraskan horizon.

The trip to Nebraska isn’t pleasant. Woody can’t
hear well, and he sometimes is incoherent. On the journey, he continues to drink a lot. Early in the movie, he returns from a bout of drinking only to fall in a hotel room and hit his head, which requires a bandage. Woody’s head doesn’t work well, as the conspicuous head-bandage he wears keeps telling us. He’s emotionally wounded. He’s delusional.

As the above image shows, one of the first shots of Woody in the movie, he’s also pathetic. Here we see him at the beginning of the movie, the room devoid of color, the wall behind him as empty and open as the state he’s from.

Woody’s problem seems simple and unsolvable. He’s just old, with nothing to do. In the beginning of the movie, there’s no depth to him; he shows no interest in anything except his sweepstakes letter. His family would prefer to put him in a home, where he will get older and then die. What else is his life good for? But this is only the way things seem.

In total, Nebraska shows us a complex Woody who has so many layers that, once we find out a few of them, we realize that there have to be dozens more. And if we just think of Woody as a pathetic old man slumping over in his chair, if the image above is our only view of Woody, we’ve missed almost everything. Because, while Nebraska seems to make bleak statements about its main character and its eponymous state, it also praises Woody repeatedly.

Look, for example, at the pluck and drive of Woody. He won’t quit. Five times in the movie, he takes off on his own for Lincoln. He must get there, and he believes he will, on his own. He doesn’t care how old he is nor what his limitations are.

Lincoln is the land where the million dollars might be, the pot of gold at the end of the journey. But Lincoln—a significant name in American history, loaded with associations of glory and greatness (and Woody does stare at Abraham Lincoln himself as depicted on Mount Rushmore)—represents hope on the horizon.

Despite his age and limitations, Woody dreams because he has that hope. It’s not ever clear if Woody understands that the million-dollar sweepstakes is a scam. Is he deluded about it? Or, is he aware of its falsity and yet nevertheless needs something to do? There’s a bit of Don Quixote in Woody, the man who believes in an idea against all other people and even the cruelty of reality itself.

And that delusion, in a way, is actually somewhat good—or so says Nebraska. Woody’s energy and drive, in spite of his age and mental limitations, are beyond admirable. (Like Don Quixote, Nebraska is about Woody’s great courage in spite of his pain and delusion.)

During the movie, we learn that Woody has been repeatedly generous to a fault. He’s lent money to everyone in Hawthorne without being repaid. He’s also a war veteran and something of a hero. He’s been a good citizen. He has, as he claims, served his country and paid his taxes.

Although early in the movie we see Woody as a hunched-over figure in an empty, ugly institutional setting, that’s not the first time we see him. That occurs in the movie’s opening shots, where he is trekking down the road, determined to walk from Montana to Lincoln.

He keeps going no matter what. It takes a police officer to halt him, but even in the film’s third shot, that police officer does not stop him. He just walks with Woody and asks him the haunting, existential questions of many great movie-Westerns: “Hello, partner. Where did you come from? Where are you going?” In a way, the movie seems to ask the provocative crucial question of the great
movie epic *Lawrence of Arabia*: “Who are you?” And yes, Woody is like Sir Lawrence, doggedly brave in the face of the impossible.

If Woody embodies the state of Nebraska, as I’ve suggested, then it’s not just a nearly empty place of simple, aging country-folk. It’s also a land of the determined, hopeful, mechanically oriented, generous, occasionally witty, honorable citizens, all qualities that Woody at times exhibits.

*Nebraska*, then, presents its subjects—the elderly middle-American and the land that raised him—in a double-edged way. Woody is simultaneously delusional and courageous, broken and energetic, scarred and plucky, hounded by envious people and yet still generous.

He might be senile, but that senility won’t stop him from achieving his dream. He’s might seem like a simple, empty person, but if you study him carefully and try to relate to him, he has more depth and mystery than you could ever fathom.

The Son Honors the Father: Woody and David Grant

The other half of *Nebraska’s* buddy-road-trip pair is David Grant, Woody’s younger son. In the first scene in which David appears, he seems, relative to Woody, smart and condescending. He’s highly annoyed. He must pick up his senile father from the police station, and this seems like it’s not the first time he’s done so.

Look at David in the above image. We see him learning for the first time that his father believes in the nonsense that he’s won a million dollars. He’s separated from his father by the pillars that create vertical lines and by the long billboard full of unreadable papers, the kinds of ignored letters and flyers that resemble his father’s sweepstakes letter.

These elements show us David’s perspective on his father, which is that Woody is a hardship. David is separated emotionally and intellectually from his father, literally represented by their physical separation here. David’s feelings are also signified by Woody’s containment in the weakest part of the frame, the bottom left-hand corner.

In the above image, both David and Woody are oppressed by that overbearing institutional ceiling above them, including the ugly tiles and fluorescent lights that press down on them. That very ceiling will show up again much later in the movie, when both Woody and David visit the marketing sweepstakes building in Lincoln, Nebraska. The settings of this police station and the sweepstakes building are therefore connected. For this father-son pair, the ultimate dream of a million-dollar prize is oppressive and confining.

Although David doesn’t get along well with his father, we learn that he has a generous heart, just like Woody’s. He wants to help his semi-senile father. And so, against the advice of his crusty mother, Kate Grant, David takes off from work and drives Woody to Lincoln.

As David and Woody leave, Kate says something provocative. She tells David that he is “sick in the head” for going to Lincoln. And then, yelling at the departing vehicle that carries father and son to Nebraska, “you’re just like your father: stubborn as a mule!”

This claim is repeated later in the movie. When Woody and David pick up Kate at the bus-stop in Hawthorne, David and Kate argue about their burden. The image below, one of the movie’s most profound shots, echoes what Kate says in this scene: “you watch it, or that’s what you’re going to turn into.”

This shot indeed shows David as a younger version of Woody. Receding into the background, facing the same way, in a similar posture with similar clothes, Woody looks like a regressed, smaller version of David. Note that they are both facing
the truck on the far-left side of the screen. What comes between them and that truck, the prized object that Woody wants to buy with his million dollars, is Kate.

In this scene, Kate is jealous. “What about me?” she asks David. She claims that both of her sons worry too much about their father, while ignoring her. David says that he has to take care of Woody because he might “not be around much longer, at least semi-coherently.”

Is the movie really about the journey to a million dollars? Yes and no. David says that Woody needs his fantasy to survive (a point that certainly connects Woody to Don Quixote, who lives only for as long as he believes in the delusion of knight errantry). However, David also says that their journey is not about the money; instead, it’s about spending what little time he has left with his father.

Kate tends to overlook David’s gifts, which include peacemaking and caretaking. Someone has to love Woody, and Kate’s constant, harsh words never help, except when she’s defending the family from greedy relatives.

Throughout the movie, David and Woody do indeed seem alike. Both are too generous; they tend to put up with too much. When David’s cousins give him grief for taking two days to drive from Billings to Hawthorne, David says nothing. Without defending himself, he seems weak.

Later in the movie, those cousins, sensing that weakness, take advantage of him by stealing Woody’s letter. This seems to have happened many times to Woody, whose relationship with Ed Pegram (the film’s minor villain) soured in part because of Ed taking advantage of Woody’s generosity. Neither David nor Woody has been successful, as defined by the social conventions depicted in the film. Ross Grant, David’s brother, is a TV news anchor in Billings. He seems to be the most “urban” person in the movie, and that’s associated with his strong advocacy for putting Woody in a nursing home. Ross is, as we Midwesterners put it, “going places.”

But the places he’s going to are only metaphorical and thus different than the real places Woody and David go to in this movie. Ross is advancing in the world. Thus, when he fights with his cousin, his face, as he says, ought not to be touched. David, by contrast, just sells electronics at a big-box retail store. His girlfriend has moved out. He doesn’t seem to have friends. Significantly, he might be a closet alcoholic. He tells Woody that he doesn’t drink anymore because it was causing him problems, seemingly significant problems.

So father and son could be related in another sense: that they are susceptible to alcohol addiction. For Woody, that addiction has hurt his family greatly. David mentions how Woody used to give his children sips of beer at age 6, and how David used to pour out his father’s alcohol because he hated seeing him drunk. Woody denies his alcoholism. David, if he has it, seems to be confronting his.

Much of this character analysis is buried; you have to uncover it by closely watching the movie and listening to the characters’ lines. In fact, David discovers Woody’s past at the same pace you do, but only little pieces of it. Much is ultimately unsaid and unknown about Woody’s past, and the visit to Hawthorne reveals only some of it.

And yet David loves his father, more than ever in the end, and beyond what Woody deserves. The journey to Lincoln might not be about the million dollars, but it is. Woody, we learn, is determined to get the money to “leave his boys something behind” when he dies. He knows that he’s been an inadequate father, and he wants to make up for it. David responds to that generous motive by helping to fulfill some of his father’s dreams.

In one of the movie’s opening scenes, Woody announces that he wants to own a new truck and a new air compressor, two key motives for acquiring the million dollars. Throughout Nebraska, we hear about both objects a lot, and we see many trucks in the background, usually behind Woody or David. In the most light-hearted scene in the movie, Ross and David try, but fail, to get their dad’s old air compressor back.

Who ends up fulfilling Woody’s smalltime dreams? Not the large corporation that deludes Woody into believing in a million-dollar sweep-
stakes. And not Ross Grant, the most financially successful member of the family.

Instead, it’s the son who is a lot like Woody. For David, in the end, trades in his car for a good used truck. He lets Woody drive down the main street of Hawthorne in that truck. On Woody’s head is a hat that says “Prize Winner,” at once a label that mocks him but also tells some truth about him.

On that drive through Hawthorne, David gives his father a little taste of glory. In the end, the son literally descends to honor the father. In the shot below, David ducks and hides on the floor of the passenger side of the truck because Woody asks him to. In this high-angle shot, David makes himself low, insignificant, out of sight. And he’s happy about that, since Woody is getting some satisfaction, and perhaps some glory, from driving the truck independently—or at least being seen by the townsfolk of Hawthorne as independent, as the town of Hawthorne might actually believe that Woody, given that he’s driving the truck, has won the money.

The last close shot we see of David in Nebraska is of him hiding on the floor, letting his father appear to drive by himself. David has lowered himself here. Compare this to the first shot of David and Woody together in the movie, specifically David’s position.

Compare the image from the first scene of the movie to the image in the final scene. David is on the right in both images. His father is in the lower-left. At the end of the movie, though, his father’s arm crosses the entire shot, undergirding David’s body. His hand is in control of the steering wheel. That’s the last close shot we see of David, the final image of a face that has frowned throughout the movie. Finally, for once, he is smiling.

In the end, David and Woody ride off into the Nebraskan horizon in their truck. This is the conventional happy ending of movie-Westerns, the riding-off-into-the-sunset moment. In the shot, they get out of the truck and switch places. With their arrangements back to normal, David takes care of his father by driving him home to Billings. They go as they went, together.

The People in Nebraska

Throughout the movie, both Woody and David are objects of comedy. We laugh at them and their follies. And yet, as I’ve argued, in the end they are honorable men who honor each other.

The movie’s unusual sustainment of a tone that’s right on the edge between parody and serious drama is what makes it in part so brilliant and complex. In truth, Alexander Payne has mastered this kind of tone in a way that few artists ever have. While his early movies Election and About Schmidt might be more parody than drama, the last four films of his career (Sideways; The Descendants; Nebraska; Downsizing) all amazingly make fun of and honor their main characters.

Looking at the minor characters in Nebraska, though, we find that most of them seem to be merely the objects of parody. These characters, especially the ones in Hawthorne, seem to have little to do except watch TV, hang out at dull bars, and, as one older man does, put a chair by the roadside and watch the traffic go by—even though there is no traffic. In a word, Hawthorne is boring.

Here we could accuse the movie of stereotyping rural Americans as simplistic hicks, as many Hollywood movies have long done. Note that most of the minor Hawthornian characters seem vain, dumb, and, in the case of Ed Pegram and Woody’s nephews, cruel and devious.

The most humorous jokes of the movie play upon these stereotypes. When Woody and David arrive at Woody’s brother’s house, David is ha-
rassed by two cousins he hasn’t seen in decades. They make fun of him for his car and for his driving speed. One of them absurdly boasts that he can drive 800 miles in eight hours.

Later, David finds himself at an impromptu extended-family reunion. Although nobody has seen David or each other for decades, they have almost no personal interaction with each other. Instead, they watch a meaningless, forgettable football game on the TV while Uncle Ray (Woody’s brother) asks inane questions about old cars.

Having shown this movie to hundreds of students, we’ve found this a scene that most of us could relate to because we have been there ourselves.

In these scenes, David finds himself boxed in, secluded, and wishing for better company. When his brother Ross arrives, David redirects everyone’s attention away from the TV when he asks Ross how long it took him to drive from Billings to Lincoln. This, along with the weather, is the hottest possible topic among these small-town Americans.

As a Midwesterner, I usually take exception to Hollywood’s absurd stereotypes of rural Americans, but *Nebraska* gets a lot of them right—from the unbearable karaoke singing at the local steakhouse, to the depressing bar scenes where Bud Light is the ale of choice, to the scene of family reunion in which the TV set is sadly the sole focus of everyone’s attention.

But not all the movie’s minor characters are so dull. When Woody drives triumphantly through town in the movie’s final scene, he passes by four townsfolk. Three of them are given a fond farewell by the movie. And all of them, like Woody, might be a lot more than they seem.

One is Bernie Bowen, a quirky and nice older man who looks like he walked right off of the streets of Plainview and into the movie’s set, someone that anybody would want as a neighbor.

Another is Woody’s brother Albert, who sits and watches the nonexistent traffic. On this day, he sees his brother probably for the last time, driving a truck down the road. Albert gets the movie’s final words, the classic American goodbye: “So long, Woody.” This line is as much a salute to Woody as it is a memorial.

A third onlooker in the final scene is Peg Nagy, whose longing gaze at Woody in his truck is among the most haunting images of the movie. We see her look out to the left, the direction to-
wards which the truck is driving in this scene, and the direction and side of the frame that in this film tends to be associated with the past.

Peg Nagy watches Woody drive by in the truck [1:48:18]. It's a serious gaze, while the humorous "Tiger Town" decal looms in the back, adding levity to that gaze. This shot is another example of the movie's double-edged take on Nebraska as simultaneously serious and humorous.

There's a lot of the past when it comes to Woody, Peg, and Hawthorne, more than we and David could ever know. During the movie, we learn that Peg was Woody's old girlfriend. She was beat out by Kate Grant because she "wouldn't let Woody round the bases." She tells us that she's had a good life: a late husband who was a good man to her, children, and grandchildren that make her beam joyfully.

A middle-aged man who should know a lot by now, David nevertheless discovers all of this for the first time while in Hawthorne. Peg is associated in the movie with the distant past and with surprise revelations about Woody. To his astonishment, David learns about this old girlfriend when he visits Hawthorne's newspaper office. It's during this visit when he hears more than he could ever dream about his father's past, including that Woody was shot down in a plane in the Korean war.

Why does Peg look this way at Woody in the final montage [see the image above]? There are many possibilities. She might be worried about Woody, who appears to be driving alone. She might also be realizing that that's the last time she might see Woody. She might also be thinking about what might have been, a life with Woody, either longingly, as if she wanted it, or merely contemplatively, as if realizing what another path in life might have offered—all these and more, perhaps even in combination.

The point is that Peg, in the two scenes she appears in, is extraordinarily complex for a minor character. As a representative citizen of Hawthorne, she suggests the possibility for complexity beneath the simple surface of any of the Hawthornians, or for that matter any of the characters. Her depth, hinted at in merely a few lines, echoes the depths of Woody that are discovered by David and by us.

If watched superficially, Nebraska seems to paint the picture of small-town Americans whom we can laugh at for their simplicity and one-dimensionality. Yet the movie strives to make as many characters as idiosyncratically human as possible. It does that for some of them—Woody, David, Kate, Peg—while hinting that the rest of its characters may be as complicated as the others. Uncle Albert and Bernie Bowen, old as they are, have their depths too, no doubt.

The Colors of Nebraska

The choice of black-and-white for film alienates most casual filmgoers. To them, it means old and dull. Why is Nebraska presented to us in black-and-white? For one, unlike most artistic movies that make this choice, perhaps this movie actually acknowledges the tastes of moviegoers who think that black-and-white is dull. Although I disagree with them, the perspective of these filmgoers deserves attention. When we drain color from something, we render it plain. For many modern viewers, colorless film is close to lifeless. It can signal boredom.

When I ask college students why Nebraska has its color scheme, one typical answer is that Alexander Payne was striving for realism, and he got it. The state of Nebraska is boring, black-and-white is boring, and thus Nebraska is presented in black-and-white. For many of these students, any movie in black-and-white is, by default, less exciting than its colorized counterparts.

Maybe Woody’s life, David’s life, the state of Nebraska, and the entire Great Plains are a little boring. To urbanites and cosmopolitans, used to a fast-paced or exciting life, the rural plains can seem
dull. Most people who drive across I-80 do not praise the views it offers. I meet people regularly, from all parts of the United States, who tell me how long and tedious driving across Nebraska is.

To take an example of the way *Nebraska* plays with our associations of Nebraska as a boring place, the image above presents us with Woody and David outside of Woody’s childhood home. This scene drudges up painful memories for Woody, including being whipped by his parents for any time that he entered their bedroom. Woody says that the old house and barn amount to “just some boards and broken windows.” When David asks Woody if he ever wanted to farm like his father did, Woody answers, “I don’t remember and it doesn’t matter.”

The setting of this shot, if we look at its dull bleakness, drained of all color, might mirror Woody’s sentiments about his past. For Woody, his former life and the landscape are all tied together into a harsh, dull, forgettable tapestry. Woody stands here as an old figure on the Plains: the life has been sucked out of him, and the color has been drained from him, as it has been from the land.

For my students, Woody’s entire life has been dull and boring, just like the places that they are accustomed to seeing. What has Woody done in his life? From a certain point of view, he just got old. That’s it. His life has also been a metaphorical black-and-white life, an idiom which can mean “simple.” He’s worked hard, drunk a lot, and had a family. Again, for go-getters like Ross Grant and my college-student audience, that’s it. But is it? No. Because black-and-white means more than dull or simple.

It also can signify timelessness. Black-and-white, as even casual Instagram users know, has a classic look to it. Had the above image of Woody and David been presented in color, it would have been easily dated to a decade or era, especially if you could see the color and shape of the characters’ clothing. But as it is, the shot looks like it could have come from almost any era.

As well, black-and-white means that the movie has a bit of a fantastical element to it. Unless you have a certain kind of colorblindness, you do not see the landscapes of Nebraska in the color scheme of *Nebraska*. The movie’s landscape photography is decidedly *not* realistic, contra Payne’s claims. It’s stylized heavily.

Black-and-white offers a novel view of the plains, and of the lives of the characters. We see these people and these places anew, differently than we ever have before. And, for much of the landscape photography in *Nebraska*, there’s an edgy beauty to it. The movie shows us, through its particular colorization, that the Plains are tough. The landscapes are beaten, harvested, endless. They endure. In their own way, they are ruggedly lovely.

So now, we are at the point of describing why black-and-white works perfectly in *Nebraska*. It not only renders its subject matter in a new light; it also echoes all elements of this movie’s plot and characters. For Woody is dull, boring, classic, tough, enduring, and beautiful (in his own way). He and the landscapes of the plains are one. They are free and open, forever. They will bore urban-
ites, perhaps to death. But for us who have come to love it, they offer life and depth.

Looking at the many landscape shots in *Nebraska*, you get the sense that if Woody were to die, he really wouldn’t, because he would be absorbed by that environment where the wind and sky dominate anything that comes under their influence.

All the people in this movie will die, but the place they came from will last. They are a bit boring, and the Plains are a bit boring, but boring has its own beauty, if you are willing to really consider it. Just look at it for a while. It too, like the characters in this movie, has depths and more depths.

Is rural Nebraska dying out? It doesn’t matter, for no matter what, it will endure. Its past, its quirks, its edges, fields, skies, history, people— they all have so much to say to us. If we just fly over it, if we think it’s a bunch of empty land, we miss everything.

Woody is Nebraska, hard to love and lovable, fragile yet durable, close to death and yet timeless. He and it are their stereotypes, and so much more.