

Living on the Edge, Finding Where You Belong

A Theological Analysis of *The Caveman's Valentine* by Jabulani McCalister

Introduction



I have chosen to use the film, *The Caveman's Valentine* (*Caveman*) for my Theological Analysis Project. The film is a drama filmed in color based on a novel by George Dawes (who also wrote the screenplay). *Caveman* is produced by Arroyo Pictures and directed by Kasi Lemmons. This movie is rated "R" and runs approximately 105 minutes. The main cast is Samuel L. Jackson (Romulus Ledbetter), Aunjanue Ellis (Officer Lulu Ledbetter), Tamara Tunie (Sheila Ledbetter), Colm Feore (David Leppenraub), Ann Magnuson (Moirra Leppenraub), Anthony Michael Hall (Mr.), Kate McNeil (Betty) Rodney Eastman (Matthew), Damir Andrei (Arnold), Joris Jarsky (Boy Toy/Andy), and Jay Rodan (Joey Peasley). In this paper, I discuss how this film highlights humanity's need to recapture our being through our connections to God and others. (All pictures taken

from <http://movies.yahoo.com/shop?d=hv&id=1804383729&cf=pstills>, 2/4/05, copyright Universal Focus, unless otherwise noted).

Caveman's Context

In the 1990's, people regularly thought about the new millennium. Some worried that the world was going to end. For example, by the mid-1990's, there were many sudden tragedies in the form of natural and unnatural disasters (1). Surely, many thought that these happenings were signs that the end of the world was coming. If nothing else, people were aware that something unusual was happening. A few years later, the new millennium began, the world did not end, and people returned to "normal" life and thought that the new millennium would bring lots of new opportunities.

Not long after the new millennium began, the United States elected a new president. In 2001, the year that *The Caveman's Valentine* was released, and less than a year after the election, the World Trade Center in New York was attacked and leveled by two high-jacked commercial airplanes. Also, some distance away, the Pentagon was attacked, yet it sustained less damage. Many people lost their lives that day. In addition, those that were present, watched the tragedy on the news, heard it on the radio, or by word of mouth, were shocked. How could this have happened? This event pierced our illusions of invincibility. Hence, we felt unsafe. Many people questioned, "How could God let this happen?" When one loses one's connection to God or a "normal life", one tends to

become lost. In those cases, the quest to find one's self begins. Sometimes we find where we belong, other times we do not.

Plot and Character Development



The basic story of *The Caveman's Valentine*, is a of mentally ill (Paranoid Schizophrenic) cave-dwelling, homeless person who investigates the murder of another homeless man (2). The main character, Romulus Ledbetter, is estranged from his family. Therefore, he seeks to regain credibility and intimacy with his daughter, Officer Lulu Ledbetter through this murder investigation. Also, Romulus is struggling with leaving his past life behind him. However, this inner conflict causes him to lose himself even more by participating in self-destructive behaviors that push others away.

In addition, Romulus' struggle with intimacy is heightened by his rejection of the God figure, Stuyversant, in this film. Again, the more Romulus pushes away the more Stuyversant attempts to reconnect with him. Romulus has brief interludes of reconnection with his daughter and Stuyversant during the investigation of the murder. In fact, he solves the murder by reentering his former life as a musician and father.

Unfortunately, after Romulus solves the case, he loses his cave and rejects his daughter's attempt to reconnect with him. Also, he rejects Stuyversant and his former life as a musician. So, once again Romulus secludes himself. Thus, instead of riding off into the sunset as a hero, he walks away fading into the shadows of existence. This ending shows that Romulus rejects himself. For, he cannot fully access himself without a connection with others.

Interpretation and Analysis

This film has prevalent existential relationship themes. Specifically, it deals with the problem of existence. That is, in Romulus Ledbetter's case, we see the problem of estrangement leading to relationship problems. The film opens with distorted and lack-luster images of reality. Also, there is very eerie chamber music slowly playing in the background. There is a *wide angle shot* of the city from the sky (3). Then, the camera descends into a *close-up shot* of the lead character delivering a speech (4). Romulus has matted hair, dingy clothes, and incoherent speech. As he continues to speak, the viewer hears laughter in the background. The film cuts to a *medium angle shot* of people laughing (5).

However, the police and the reporter are not laughing. The reporter and the police officer are reaching out to Romulus; yet, they are more than an arm's length distance away. *Several shot/reverse shots* are shown between the crowd and Romulus to show the physical and emotional distance between the crowd and Romulus (6). The rest of the

crowd is shown standing even further away. The viewer really senses Romulus' isolation. Most likely, he has no home, friends and family. Still, people in the neighborhood seem to know him either as Rom or Caveman. Romulus' relationships are peripheral at best.

How did he wind up alone? Well, through a series of flashbacks, hallucinations, and dream-like states, we learn some of Romulus' past. As his investigation of the murder unfolds, we find out that Romulus was once an accomplished, Julliard trained, pianist. Suddenly, at the height of his booming career, he withdrew from society. Also, we find out that his withdrawal causes isolation and estrangement from his family (Sheila, his wife, and Officer Lulu, his daughter), friends and most of society.

Romulus' daughter repeatedly insists that he needs help for his sickness, but Romulus ignores each intervention. Yet, he does use his skills as a musician to get the help he needs to solve the case. For the true killer is found and Romulus is, temporarily, a hero. After the case is solved, he returns to the homeless life. Romulus' lack of relationships seem very strange since his family and he are African Americans. Typically, strong relationship bonds are present in African American families. As a carry over from Africa and a coping mechanism to combat slavery, African Americans have always had a "kinship-network" that provides for support during traumatic times (7). These bonds extend well beyond biological links (8).

Only recently has this pattern been somewhat altered, due to increased outside pressure to provide for one's own family (9). These relationships are apparently tenuous between Romulus and his immediate family. For example, whenever Romulus calls to speak with Lulu, Sheila, Lulu's mother, always makes a negative comment in the background such as, "What does he want now (dialogue)?" Interestingly, the viewer only sees Sheila's face in Romulus' hallucinations or dreams. Since the viewer is experiencing the movie through the main character's viewpoint, that image gives us a sense of disconnection with Sheila. Sheila and Romulus once had a good relationship, judging by his hallucinations and flashbacks. Somehow, the relationship became strained; nonetheless, the viewer is never shown to what extent. For they could still be married and just separated.



For instance, in one of Romulus' flashbacks we are shown his last recital. This flashback appears in stages throughout the movie. He is in mid-twenties and about to perform in front of a full auditorium. Just before he plays, he freezes. The people's whispers become louder and he completely shuts down. Immediately, the viewer sees Romulus walking away. In the background, there is a blurry image moving towards him. As the image comes into sharp focus, the viewer sees that it is Sheila, calling out to Romulus numerous times; but he never responds. She gives up, turns around and leaves. Then, her image becomes blurry again. This symbolizes his official break with prominent relationships. For once he lost his sanity, he lost his livelihood and important relationships.

No one really knows exactly what causes the onset of Paranoid Schizophrenia. However, it is speculated that environmental stressors are one cause (10). Moore Hines and Boyd-Franklin states, "The identity of African American fathers, regardless of income, is linked to their ability to provide for their families. Success in being a provider, however, often is limited by discrimination" (11). Perhaps the pressure of performing as one of the few Julliard trained African Americans and taking care of his household was too much for Romulus to handle. There are other talented African Americans who are qualified to accomplish similar things, but only a few are allowed to make it in the elite crowd. The film highlights the lack of African Americans in the elite circles that Romulus re-enters in order to investigate his case.

Whatever the cause, once Romulus' breakdown happens and is never treated, he loses everything. Roukema states, "the sooner the disease is treated, the better the prognosis" (12). Well, there were no extended kinships to whom Romulus had access. If there were, they would have possibly encouraged him to seek counseling. Either way, most African Americans, especially men, do not regularly participate in therapy due to mistrust and misconceptions about it (13) The latter maybe why Romulus ignores his daughter's suggestions to seek treatment. One would think that Romulus does not want help. Well, he does want help from his family but due to his illness he will not go home. On the one hand, he appears to be embarrassed. On the other hand, his wife is not open to his return. Even when his daughter extends an invitation for his return home he rejects it.

Caveman in Dialogue with the Christian Faith

The existential problem that this film highlights is existence. That is, Romulus Ledbetter existed to his family, friends, and fans, until he lost his sanity. As stated, this film emphasizes Romulus' loss of important world connections. Paul Tillich calls it, the *ultimate concern* (14). Tillich affirms, "Man is ultimately concerned with his being and meaning. . . Man is infinitely concerned about the infinity to which he belongs, from which he is separated, and for which he is longing" (15). The ultimate concern for Romulus is his loss of identity, hence his existence. As a result, he has lost access to his former life (kinship bonds, career, shelter, etc.). The situation is probably disconcerting for him, since he has no network to help him through this time of need (16).

Of course, it can be argued that Lulu has repeatedly suggested "getting him help". But she is referring to being placed in a mental hospital for therapy. Romulus desires reunification with his daughter not a foreign agency that cannot replace the love his family yields. Moore Hines and Boyd-Franklin state,

Many African Americans view therapy as a process for "crazy people". Some assume that clinicians will operate in the same way as other agencies (e.g. welfare system, schools) that have been intrusive in telling families what they "can" and "cannot" own (e.g. telephone or television). Others may view serious emotional difficulties as "the wages of sin"; the person who manifests psychiatric symptoms may be seen as "mean" or "possessed by the devil" (particularly if he or she engages in antisocial behavior) and may be regarded as having the potential to change his or her behavior at will. Some believe that emotional, behavioral, and relationship difficulties result from not believing and practicing biblical and cultural guidelines for living. For some, seeking help from a mental health professional rather than through prayer

may signify a lack of trust in God; for others, this is perceived as turning to the "system" that has negatively influenced African American well-being. (17).

Therefore, each time Lulu mentions the latter intervention, Romulus either ignores her or runs away. She is seeking to have her "daddy" back, but he perceives her help as her pushing him away.

Romulus seems to be trapped in the middle of being and non-being. His ultimate concern has somehow overwhelmed him. On the one hand, Romulus wants to return to the family he once knew. This quest is evidenced by his hallucinations of his wife's moral support and his expressed need to impress his daughter by solving the murder case. In addition to his desired family reunion, Romulus shows interest in being a musician. Unfortunately, Romulus is also trying to run from his former life as a musician. Yet, at the same time, he constantly hears music and writes out the compositions. In fact, angel-like creatures are part of his symphony. Hence, Romulus' ultimate concern of existence is linked to his love of his former profession. For example, the ultimate concern of existence is represented by Stuyversant, the unseen "man" in the skyscraper who frequently illumines Romulus' "second sight" to "see things others cannot (dialogue)." For instance, Romulus often states that Stuyversant's bright colored lights are trying to draw him back to his former life as musician.

What Romulus cannot see is that his former life as a musician, husband, father, and homeowner are linked. Even his attempts to escape his former life are interrupted by Stuyversant, who is a caricature of God. In fact, one scene shows Romulus in a new recital. First, this recital helps him get closer to solving the case, hence winning Lulu's favor. Second, he gets an opportunity to play again. Third, his image of his wife encourages him to play. As Romulus plays a new composition, Stuyversant's lights are shining brightly, the angel-like creatures are playing their instruments, and Romulus is playing passionately, and a female voice says, "Welcome home Rom (dialogue)." Alas, within minutes, Romulus begins to act abnormally and is ejected from the recital.



For some reason, Romulus is not comfortable with himself now or in the past. This is obvious from his constant correction when people call him homeless. He firmly shouts, "I am not homeless! I live in a cave (dialogue)!" Therefore, his existence is hampered by his disease and his behavior. Even though his compositions are brilliant, his self-destructive patterns perpetuate his loneliness and estrangement from his whole self and the ultimate being (18).

Since Romulus does not exist to the world or his kinship bonds, he is in a state of despair (19). In addition, his estrangement and state of despair keep him from accepting help when he needs it. He may feel that his illness is his own fault. Likewise, he may feel embarrassed that he is in a state of conflict and that he cannot fix (20). Still, Romulus may feel that Stuyversant is punishing him, since his musical talent seemingly contributed to his estrangement (21).

Stuyversant is actually working with Romulus in order to reconnect him to ultimate being. In the midst of the internal conflict of being and external conflict with others Romulus is not totally cut off from existence. Yes, most people only see him as a homeless, mentally ill, destitute, middle-aged African American male. However, he is also a human being, husband, father, an accomplished musician. Although Romulus finally rejects his existence and Grace, no amount of estrangement can change the aforementioned facts regarding his' existence. Tillich agrees, "Man is never cut off from the ground of being, not even in the state of condemnation. . . Grace reunites the estranged [even when they reject it]. . . Man in relation to God, cannot do anything without him" (22). Romulus' relationships are the Grace that is extended to him. Hence, he can never be whole without them; his reunion with others makes him whole.

Overall, *The Caveman's Valentine*, reminds us of the importance of relationships. Everyone needs *solitude* sometimes. But once solitude whether forced or self-inflicted, goes too far, we are lost (23). Having no intentional connection to any being denies our ultimate concern. We survive through our connections with the ultimate concern. Although Tillich implies that the ultimate concern is God, alternatively, he explicitly states that the ultimate concern cannot be an object or God (24). I disagree. God can be our ultimate concern. As theologians and clergy, it behooves us to remember that God reaches out to us in ways that help us become renewed in the ground of being. God is the one that makes us whole enough to be able to interact with others. Sometimes we forget that our knowledge, therapeutic interventions, and kinship bonds are linked into the Grace that helps us be our full beings. If we are going to assist others like Romulus become reconnected to their ultimate concern in the church or academia, we must not forget the reason we minister to people.

Endnotes

1. Time Magazine. No specific quotes or paraphrases. ed. V. 148. New York: Time Magazine June-Dec. 1996. Text-fiche.
2. Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com). *The Caveman's Valentine* Plot summary by J. Hailey.
3. T. Corrigan (1997). *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. Longman: New York. (3rd ed.).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Paulette Moore Hines and Nancy Boyd Franklin, "African American Families", In *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* edited by Monica McGoldrick, Joe Giordano, and John K. Pearce (1996). The Guilford Press: London (2nd. ed.).
8. Ibid., P. 68.
9. Ibid., P. 71.

10. Richard Roukema (2003). *Counseling for the Soul in distress: what every religious counselor should know about emotional and mental illness*. (2nd ed.). The Haworth Pastoral Press: New York.
11. Moore Hines & Boyd-Franklin, P. 69.
12. Roukema, P. 59.
13. Moore Hines & Boyd-Franklin, P. 78.
14. Paul Tillich (1951), *Systematic Theology* (v.1). The University of Chicago Press: Chicago. P. 14.
15. Ibid., P. 14.
16. Moore Hines & Boyd-Franklin, P. 78.
17. Ibid., P. 78.
18. Paul Tillich, (1957). *Systematic Theology* (v. 2). The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, P. 72.
19. Ibid., P. 75.
20. Ibid., P. 75.
21. Ibid., P.78.
22. Ibid., P. 78-79.
23. Ibid., P. 71, 80.
24. Paul Tillich (1951), *Systematic Theology* (v.1). The University of Chicago Press: Chicago. P. 6.