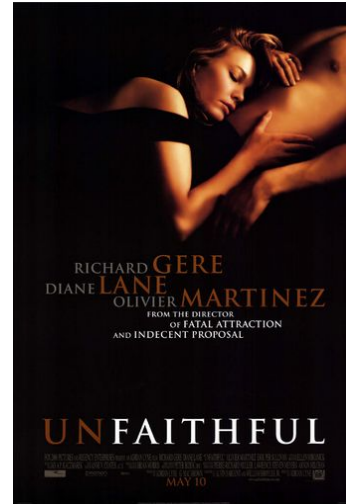


Unfaithful

A Theological Analysis by Derrick Williams

Fox Films released the movie *Unfaithful* in 2002. This popular film served as a catalyst for culture investigations into adultery, passion, and revenge. In this paper I will give a description of the characters, plot, and themes of *Unfaithful*. I will conclude the paper with a theological analysis of the movie examining the themes of responsibility, human freedom, and motivations for decision-making. I will examine these themes using insights and observations from theologians Saint Augustine, Karl Rahner, and Paul Tillich. (Attached picture taken from <http://www.thezreview.co.uk/posters/u/unfaithful.htm>, 1/28/05).



Unfaithful stars Richard Gere, who plays Edward Sumner, and Diane Lane, who plays his wife Connie Sumner. The Sumner's have been happily married for eleven years and have a gregarious nine-year-old named Charlie. Theirs is the contented, upper middle class life in the suburbs of New York, complete with one S.U.V., one foreign model sedan, and a dog named Poppy. Ed works in town in an upper management position in an auto-plant. Connie commutes daily into Manhattan to pick her son up from school and to run household errands.

One fateful day, Connie gets caught in an unusually fierce windstorm where she literally gets swept away, and over into Paul Martel, played by Oliver Martinez. Paul Martel is a 28 year-old handsome French book dealer. Paul was holding a bundle of

books, but is now holding Connie. They both lay on the New York City pavement, awkwardly and sensually bewildered and overcome by the wind.

Paul notices that Connie has bruised her knees badly during her fall. He invites her upstairs into his atmospheric Soho loft where she can wash off her bruises and get a couple of band-aids for her knees. While she's in his lavatory aiding her wounds, Paul is preparing tea for two. He offers her the tea and a book from his vast collection. The tea seems to be an innocent gesture, but the book of choice seems to be planned for affect. Paul leads her to a specific bookcase and tells her to get the book that is on the "second shelf from the top, fourth one from the left". He tells her to turn to page 23, and she recites out loud:

**Drink wine, this is life eternal. This all that youth will give to you.
It is the season for wine, roses, and drunken friends.
Be happy for this moment....for this *moment* is your life.**

It is significant that both Paul joins Connie in reading the phrase "for this *moment* is your life". Paul may believe that "the moment" serves as a tool for fleeting pleasure with little to lose, but the "*moment*" will impact his destiny in a dire way. Connie now hurriedly leaves the loft, thoroughly and visibly shaken by her sudden and passionate attraction to this stranger. Before exits his loft, Paul shouts an invitation to come back at anytime to check out a book or so.

Connie returns home to the safety and normalcy of her mother/wife role. She even tells her family of the strange meeting with the gentleman who helped her after a fall. Of course Connie does not share her temptations and feelings with Edward. She soon finds herself constantly visiting the *moment* in her head, and soon makes her daily musings of

Paul a reality. Connie finally visits Paul one day unannounced. Connie becomes unfaithful.



Connie and Paul become ardent, passionate lovers. They meet every weekday around 12PM. Paul's spacious and atmospheric Soho loft becomes their noontime love nest. Connie becomes increasingly preoccupied as the affair with Paul intensifies. She begins to burn simple meals, forgets to pick her son up from school, and suddenly shows signs of sexually frigidity. Edward becomes suspicious. He decides to give his company private investigator Frank, the special assignment of tracking his wife. Frank confirms Ed's suspicions with pictures of Connie repeatedly leaving Paul's loft. He also gives Edward snapshots of the two leaving a movie theatre in a tight embrace. The private investigator completes his mission by handing the devastated husband Paul's address. (Attached picture taken from <http://www.movieroundtable.com/Unfaithful.htm>, 1/28/05).

Edward makes his way to Paul's loft in a dazed state. He's in the surreal world of shock. He at first gazes up from the street at the loft, then suddenly decides to go in. The building door is locked. One of the tenants of the building suddenly leaves the building and Edward goes in. He climbs the stairs to the third floor where Paul lives. He knocks on Paul's door. Paul opens the door and Edward introduces himself as "Edward Sumner ... Connie's husband." Ed asks Paul if he could come in, and Paul hesitantly agrees. The next few minutes are filled with Ed's intimate questions of Paul and Connie's dealings.

Ed is driven by a need to make sense of it all. Paul answers all of Edward's questions candidly, without sensitivity or discretion. There is an instant where Paul glances at a kitchen knife laying on the cutting board. He dismissed the thought behind his glance and continues to answer questions. Paul's answers vividly show the naiveté of his youth, the callousness of his nature, and the awkwardness of this meeting. Edward enters Paul's bedroom and notices an item of familiarity. It's a small, solid, glass ball with a winter scene enclosed. Edward asks Paul where he got the item. Paul answers, "It was a gift". Ed sits completely dumbfounded on Paul's bed. Ed realizes that this is a special gift that he gave to Connie.

Edward becomes visibly sick and disoriented. He rises off the bed suddenly. And as if by reflex and trance, Ed bludgeons Paul with the glass orb. The two blows prove fatal. Edward coming out of his shock now realizes that he has just killed a man. He frantically decides the evidence of his actions. He washes the blood off of his hands and off of the

floor and wraps Paul's body in a rug. While he's doing this Paul's answering service comes on. It is Connie talking telling the now deceased Paul that she's decided to end the



relationship. She says that she can no longer go on hurting her family. Ed pauses to listen, then hurriedly goes on with his plan to cover up his actions. He ends up driving Paul's body to a trash dump where it is later discovered. (Attached picture taken from <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/unfaithful.htm>, 1/28/05).

The New York City Police get involved when they find Connie's name and phone number in Paul's loft. They come to the suburbs to visit Connie on two occasions and she downplays her involvement with the deceased for fear of being found out. It is clear however, that one of the detectives is suspicious of Connie. Connie soon realizes that Ed has killed Paul when she notices the glass ball back in their home. Ed admits his act to Connie and they live in expectation of being found out by the law. Edward Sumner comes to the conclusion that he must turn himself in. His distraught wife tells him not to. She says that they can get through the ordeal without anyone knowing. Ed says "But we will know".

The movie's final scene takes place in their car. The car is stopped at a red light, in front of a police station, on a wet, twilight lit street. Edward and Connie Sumner are at the brink of a life changing *moment*. They fantasize about selling all their possessions and running away to Mexico. They smile and think of the new life they could have, completely free of their ruinous past. They ponder the fruit of this imagined "new life". The light turns from red to



green. The camera studies the car at different angles, and the silence of the soundtrack is pregnant with possibilities and the potential of their human *freedom*. The movie ends.

(Attached picture taken from <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/unfaithful.htm>, 1/28/05).

Unfaithful poses questions that have far-reaching theological applications. These questions center on the freedom of humankind, and humankind's capacity to make liberating decisions. The movie's main characters all seem to be linked by a series of decisions. Connie decides to go back to Paul's loft. Edward decides to confront Paul. Paul decides to let Edward into his loft. Edward decides to hide his crime. Connie eventually decides to end her affair. Edward decides that he should turn himself in. All of these decisions affect the destinies of the three main characters, thus shaping their future.

One may argue that the winds of fate blew Connie into Paul's arms that fateful morning. Or some may totally excuse Paul as the victim being captive to his male drive, and his incessant need for "new land to conquer". Or some might say "Edward had every right to knock Paul over the head. Look at the cards that were dealt him. He had no choice but to commit this crime being put in such a situation!"

Theologian Karl Rahner saw the faculty of *decision* as being one of the chief attributes of humankind. An assessment that would rob Connie, Paul, and Edward out of the responsibility of their decisions is to rob them of the fullness of their humanity. If Connie excused her adulterous behavior as an accident, and deemed herself a "victim of fate", she, by very ability to define herself, is reinforcing evidence that she is indeed a subjective being, capable of self-interpretation. This self-interpretation suggests that she is a free subject



and not a victim of circumstance or fate.¹ Rahner states in his work *Foundation of Christian Faith*

...I always experience myself as the subject who is given over to himself. It is in this experience that something like real subjectivity and self-responsibility, and this not only in knowledge but also in action is present as an a priori, transcendental experience of my freedom.

It is only through this that I know that I am free and responsible for myself, even when I have doubts about it, raise questions about it, and cannot discover it as an individual datum of my categorical experience in time and space.”²

Connie recognized the responsibility and power in freedom, when towards the end of the movie she replayed the day of the windstorm in her mind. In this imaginary re-enactment of that day, she chose not to go upstairs with Paul, but decided to enter a nearby cab instead. How very different Connie’s, Paul’s, and Edward’s destinies would have been if she had originally decided to enter that nearby cab. (Attached picture taken from www.jesuiten.org/frameset.asp?file=jubilaeum_karl_rahner_presseinfo.htm&dir=/aktuell/jubilaeum,1/28/05).

However, one can and should recognize the precarious positions that all three characters were in. Maybe in the frailty of the *moment*, Connie’s capacity to make clear moral judgments was greatly minimized. Our moments of hesitation, and the seconds in between meditation and decision are filled with our “fallen-ness”. Maybe Connie believed that the passion which felt so sensually right, could not be entirely morally wrong. Rahner posits these comments on the limitations of our fallen decision making capacity:

...the subject never has an absolute certainty about the subjective and therefore moral quality of these individual actions because, as real and as objectified in knowledge, these actions are always a synthesis of original freedom and imposed necessity, a synthesis which cannot be resolved completely in reflection.³

¹ Karl Rahner. *Foundations of Christian Faith*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1978) p. 38.

² Ibid. p.36.

³ Ibid. p.97.

Rahner in no way makes an excuse for Connie here, but does take into account the fallen nature. This fallen-ness has invaded every fiber of humankind's being ... including humankind's capacity for correct estimation of moral certainty at all times.

Saint Augustine believes that humankind left to its own devices will inevitably make the immoral choice. He states in his anti-Pelagian treatise, *The Spirit and the Letter*, : “ Free choice alone, if the way of truth is hidden, avails for nothing but sin;...”⁴ For Augustine, humankind's only choice, if humankind is to make the right choice, is to be led by the law, and the Spirit of God.

Well, what is the right choice? As for Connie, it is clear that adultery was the wrong choice. Anthropologist Tiger & Fox say that all cultures have punishment for the crime of adultery.⁵ This suggest that it is universally considered as wrong. Donald Greiner writes in his book *Adultery in the American Novel* :

If marriage assures order in sexual matters, the proper inheritance of property, and the perpetuation of civilized behavior, then adultery must be judged a threat to both individual security and universal stability. Violate the bedroom and society wavers. Commit adultery and the great chain of being breaks a link.⁶

Yes, society agrees that adultery is wrong. But does the above quote motivate one to chastity? Does the knowledge of societal ramifications and biblical restrictions make the option of adultery less palatable?

And in the case of Edward: was he justified in killing his wife's lover? Secular law makes provisions for “crimes of passion”. What if Edward remembered the sixth commandment prohibiting murder? Would this remembrance be enough to prevent the crime? Should one's actions and decisions be governed solely by remembrance and adherence to law? Should the law be the sole factor as to what is the “right thing to do”?

⁴ Saint Augustine. *Earlier Writings*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), p.165.

⁵ Lionel Tiger & Robin Fox. *The Imperial Animal*. (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1971). p. 12.

⁶ Donald Greiner. *Adultery in the American Novel*. (SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1985)p.122.



Paul Tillich writes in the first volume of his book *Systematic Theology*: “The law of love is the ultimate law because it is the negation of law;...”⁷ A heart rooted in love overcomes “the right thing to do” (which is always relative), and is led into decisions and actions propelled by love!⁸ (Attached picture taken from

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USATillich.htm>, 1/28/05).

As is seen in *Unfaithful*, every *moment* has the power to shape one’s destiny. Every *moment* is pregnant with the possibilities of decision. These moments of decision are not to be feared, but to be embraced. Every act, and every decision further positions the person into their destiny, and creates history.⁹ Rahner equates this decision- making capacity with freedom. This freedom is a freedom that has the power to form and shape. The joy of this freedom is not solely in forming an action, but the joy and power is in the forming of oneself via the action.¹⁰

Yet the freedom in this life are shadows of the purest sense of freedom. Our righteous decisions in this temporal state are forming the highest sense of freedom: *eternal freedom*.¹¹ Jesus is the perfect example of the power and impact of human decision. He had the opportunity to use his decisions making capacity for his own use, but he chose to be *faithful* to the responsibilities of his call.

Just as Connie’s, Paul’s, and Edward’s decisions and actions were self deposits into their grim fate, our decisions and actions can be deposits into a glorious eternity.

⁷ Paul Tillich. *Systematic Theology*, Volume I. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) p.152.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Rahner. p.96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.94.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.96.

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