Critical Analysis of Death Knocks by Woody Allen

Woody Allen's play, Death Knocks, is one of many from his anthology Getting Even published in 1971. It is a play about a wealthy dress manufacturer named Nat Ackerman who is visited by Death one night. Providing a humorously fresh take on the idea of death itself, Allen's character makes a deal with Death asking for only one more day if he won a game of gin rummy. The whole play takes place in his room on the second floor of his home. Throughout the play, the reader gets consistently humorous and ironic dialogue coming from both of these characters. This essay will focus on viewing this play through Reader-Response criticism and a bit of Marxist and Formalist criticism as well.

Nat Ackerman comes off as a bit of a boring person, but he surprises the readers by being so comfortable around Death. So much so, he comes off as rude. He doesn't see him as others would, with fear and immense respect. Phrases such as "Don't 'but' me." "Listen Mister, it's very late." "That's too bad for you. You should pay attention." (Allen online). His lack of hospitality towards Death also hinted at his rudeness; there were at least three occasions where he completely ignored his request for a drink or some food. The final straw, for me, was after Death had granted him an extra day of life; Nat still had the nerve to call him a schlep to his friend, Moe.

Death, on the other hand, is very funny. He's clumsy and distracted, but nice. Many of the stage directions were directed at his clumsiness (And, on cue, we hear a terrific crash.) (He fumbles through pocket...) (Allen online). The stage directions do not interfere with the play, rather they improve the visual. There aren't very many, which gives the reader the freedom to
interpret it as they may. The stage directions mostly included Death's distractions (*Lifting newspaper NAT was reading*) (*Looking at his own knee*) which added humor.

The play presents many realities of death: there is no perfect time to die, death itself is never what we expect or what we picture it to be (which is why most of us are so afraid of death), and death is different for everyone. It presents the possibility of cheating Death by winning a game of Gin Rummy, which adds to the humor since we can't control it. It was very ironic to read Nat's line "*Listen, Mister, it's very late.*" (*Allen online*). It's obvious he doesn't want to go but it's amusing that he's trying to project authority over Death.

Many of these realities are supported throughout the play, as well as other underlying messages that make us think and reflect about what we would expect. When Death comes for Nat, he doesn't care that he's "*in perfect health.*" This shows that Death waits for no one, that there is no 'perfect' time to die. In addition, death itself isn't what we expect. "*I'm sorry, I still can't believe you're Death.*" (*Allen online*). What would we hope for? When you imagine Death, what do you see? An interesting idea was that Death can also be nice. He tells Nat he'll "try his best" to let him fall on the couch versus the ground. How many times have we heard that material things mean nothing? Yet in this play it feels like new information due to the current situation. *DEATH: Where do you come to knowledge of the eternal mysteries?  NAT: What are you talking about? I make a beautiful dollar...* (*Allen online*). Nat surprisingly only asks for one more day. This presents an opportunity to reflect on how many days we would ask for. What are you good at? Would you be willing to bet Death? The following line depicts that death is different for everyone (*I once saw a picture of you playing chess. Couldn't be me, because I don't*
As part of the reader-response criticism, I've added the words I had to look up in order to understand the play. Faust. I wasn't quite sure why he would want to compare himself to him. Eden Roc, Miami. I didn't know where that was, or that it was considered a fancy place but now I do. Rock Hudson=Handsome Man. I had to look up 'furrier.' After I did, I'm not sure what they look like or how they compare to anyone's idea of Death. Maybe that's the point? I looked up schvitz, passementaries, and schlep. Schlep is not a nice word. I also looked up rules of Gin Rummy, then read the play again. Perhaps readers who understand gin rummy would get something out of this stage direction. Not me, though. (Nat deals, turns up a five) (Allen online).

This play includes many instances where prose is used beautifully. I thought the following scene was written very productively. It says so much in such a small amount of space.

DEATH (being edged to the doorway): Where's a good hotel? What am I talking about hotel, I got no money. I'll go sit in Blickford's. (He picks up the News.)

NAT: Out. Out. That's my paper. (He takes it back.)

DEATH (exiting): I couldn't just take him and go. I had to get involved in rummy.

NAT (calling after him): And be careful going downstairs. On one of the steps the rug is loose. (And, on cue, we hear a terrific crash. Nat sighs, then crosses to the bedside table and makes a phone call.) (Allen online).

Also, Allen showed us a much better way to say "they played for hours" as, "They continue to play as music steals in and the lights dim until all is in total darkness. The lights come up again, and now it is later and their game is over. Nat tallies." (Allen online). Lovely stage directions.
What was interesting to me is that as I read this play, I pictured Nat as the antagonist and Death as the protagonist. The way I had read it in my head, as described in this essay, made it seem that way. However, I went on YouTube and looked up some videos of *Death Knocks* and I came upon the interpretation from Lisa Klage's Director's Fest (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyLB6nWcsVc). In this interpretation, they had it the other way around. They had Death as loud and obnoxious and rude; the antagonist. Then, they had Nat Ackerman as a humble, calm, pleasant man; the protagonist. This was interesting to see because of how differently they had perceived the same exact play. I watched other interpretations although this one was by far the best performance out of them all, in my opinion. There's only so much you can change, if anything, without losing the soul of the play.

This play shows how wealthy people think they're better than anybody, even Death. He never showed him the respect he needed to show him, given that he was Death and all. I also thought it was interesting he was offended that Death didn't remember his name. Then to call him a schlep, take away the newspaper as he walked out, etc. it just made him seem as a less likable person. You would think he would be grateful that he had given him one extra day, maybe offer him a place to stay or let him keep his money, etc. In the end, I ended up rooting for Death to take Nat, that schlep.