

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Knight (in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*) open/adventurous

Overview *The Seventh Seal* (released 1958) was written by Bergman as he convalesced in a Swedish hospital. He felt a breath of inspiration, and with true instinct realized that this film would be one of his highest creative moves. It touches those themes, of the kind of presence God has, the darkness of suffering and death, and the high stakes of daily life, which were to raise him above the norm directors of his (or any) time. The plot of the Knight's Return, through a landscape scarred by the horrors of the Black Plague, leads this noble but cynical returnee, to a finally no-win chess game with Death. The Knight finally makes it back to his castle and wife, but not much farther, for the Death awaiting us all has arrived for him. Death has decisively won the chess match.

Character The Knight is a stark straight-standing flaxen haired noble of a man, who has returned discouraged and tired from his efforts as Defender of the Faith on the Crusade. Returning to a land ripped apart by the Black Plague, which stripped the population of Europe in half, during the 14th century, the Knight knows that Death is everywhere, and upon seeing a black cowed figure, sitting by the seashore, he knows at once that the time for his own final confrontation has arrived. The symbol for that confrontation will be the chess match which at first we see Death playing against himself. The Knight challenges Death to play him. The several glimpses we have, of the Knight playing chess with Death, prove that the latter has the upper hand, and even after a loss can retrigger a new match. There will be no end to the games by which black cowed antagonist wears the Knight away. Yet the Knight moves staunchly and nobly through this forbidding landscape of death, standing for life, sharing compassion, and eating gratefully at simple people's tables. He is a noble figure, if doomed.

Parallels A Greek folksong, *ton charon ton antamosa* (I met Charon) tells the haunting story of a peasant strongman who returns to his cabin one night to find Death awaiting him there. The two wrestle furiously for the soul of the peasant, who is in the end overpowered. This pre-modern fragment of violence bespeaks the ancient tradition of resistance to death. In the Christian Middle Ages any number of Knights and Chevaliers fight for honor in life and life everlasting—to wit a literary nobleman like Roland, in *The Chanson de Roland*, or Chretien de Troyes, in the legend of Perceval. Film offers outstanding examples of men of dignity who repel Death and Evil: The Sheriff of *High Noon* (1952), who defends his town and the cause of honor, single-handed (1952), or Schindler in *Schindler's List* (1993), a tribute to canny nobility, as it deals with reality to save lives from death.

Illustrative moments

Encounter The Knight is just returning home from the Holy Land, where he has been fighting in the Crusades. He is tired, disillusioned, and eager to return to his Castle, which lies on the other side of a forest, from the point at which the film action begins. As he enters the area of that action he sees a figure on the beach, whom he cannot ignore. It is Death in the stark garb of a monk. The knight, who has been playing a chess game with himself, and is in the midst of the game, decides to challenge Death to a match. He figures that as long as he wins, he can defer his own death. His challenge is accepted, and breaks up his own self-match, clearing the board for the challenge game.

Confession As he and his squire continue on horse, toward his castle, the Knight encounters a group of local actors, who are getting ready to perform in a nearby town. He bonds especially with a young couple and their baby, and sees through them vignettes of high spiritedness, and rumors of the fast advancing plague, the Black Death, which is voraciously striding across the

countryside. The Knight stops at a chapel to confess and to pray, and finds that the black robed confessor is in fact Death himself, and that a mural going up on the nave depicts an obsessive Dance of Death. Before learning the identity of the confessor, the Knight reveals his survival strategy, to keep playing chess with the Devil, as a way of postponing Death. The confessor smiles.

Compassionate Upon leaving the Church, at which he has confessed to Death himself, the Knight encounters a young girl who is being carted away, to be burned at the stake for 'consorting with the devil.' The Knight wishes to alleviate her suffering, and assures her that she has nothing to do with the devil, but when she protests that everything in and around her *is* the devil, he understands her, and feels deep sympathy. He stares into her eyes, and sees nothing of the evil, but only terror. The mob escorting her to the scaffold is, like the mob that at another time almost bullies the actor Joseph to death, a Bergmanian 14th century rabble, that repels the dignity of the noble knight.

Returning As the trip home nears its goal, the Knight completes a final chess match with Death, loses, and hears Death proclaim that at their next meeting the Knight will die. Meanwhile the troupe arrives on the other side of the forest, at the Knight's castle, and the Knight once more rejoins his wife, and his possessions. Joseph, the actor, is with the Knight and exercises his from-the-start claimed visionary powers; on a distant hill he can discern in silhouette a linked-hand dance, led by death, including the Knight, whose turn has come at last.

Discussion questions

We learn that the Knight is tired and disillusioned from his adventure on the Crusades. Does he behave disillusioned? Is he a creative force among the people around him?

What relation does the Knight adopt to the troupe of actors? Does he bond with them? They with him?

What is the particular significance of the Book of Revelation to the argument of *The Seventh Seal*? Does Bergman have his own point to make here, about the nature of God?