

## **Wes Anderson - how the search for surrogate families defines his leading characters**

Many of Wes Anderson's films are about a search for familiarity in family. From *Bottle Rocket*'s Texan highways to an island of rubbish in *Isle of Dogs*, you can trace many of his characters' motivations back to defining their identity by a sense of community. This pursuit of familial feeling isn't without consequences; many of Anderson's protagonists know that togetherness can be detrimental. However, this theme - uniting Anderson's near 25-year body of work - still advocates that a collection of flawed individuals is better than striving for purpose alone. Family ultimately conquers all.

### **The individual vs. the collective dynamic**

Anderson often employs narrative devices, such as framing stories, and uses ensemble casts to distort our focus on the protagonist. Brannon M. Hancock expands on this latter point in a *Journal of Religion & Film* paper, ''Anderson's films are ensembles, focusing not on a single protagonist... but on a cast of characters who find identification in communion.'' This is unusual in American cinema because screenplays usually follow a single protagonist's journey. It's not that Anderson doesn't follow the rules, however; he just frames his characters' emotional arcs more allegorically, using their journeys as metaphors for the desire we all feel to be part of a group. This also feeds into how the director's protagonists see themselves. Many of his characters rely on fantasies of a happier reality, in which their lives are defined by belonging, to get by. Hancock furthers this point, ''his characters have the startling ability to view their lives according to their desires, seeing things how they want, which is not always consistent with reality.'' This alternative perspective is upheld by Anderson's supporting characters, adding to the 'story book' nature of the director's films.

### **Surrogating families in Anderson's films**

Though we see examples of characters searching for surrogate family connections across Anderson's work, four of his films best illustrate this theme. They are:

1. *Bottle Rocket* (1996).
2. *Rushmore* (1998).
3. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).
4. *Isle of Dogs* (2018).

Here, Anderson's characters are bound by a drive to find family where none exists or to replace already damaged bonds. Further, characters' identity trauma is often either parent- or child-based. Joseph Massaro, writing in *Medium*, says of Anderson's characters, "no matter their age or class, the loss/abandonment of a parent has shaped their perspective." A. Vaughn Vreeland, meanwhile, specifies that "reversion to childlike dependency is common in Anderson's work", showing that his characters are defined by family authority figures.

### **Bottle Rocket**

Anderson's first film perfectly illustrates his characters' drive to make family connections. At the start of *Bottle Rocket*, we see protagonist Anthony in a voluntary psychiatric unit. His family have isolated him there, and he is only spared by his friend Dignan 'breaking him out'. Dignan is co-dependent on Anthony; he doesn't just need him to help hatch hair-brained heists, he relies on him for a sense of wholeness. Hancock says that "Dignan recognizes the need for community and works to create his own." Although we later learn that Anthony was likely committed due to Dignan's actions, we know this obsession is vital for their mutual survival. Anthony reaffirms this as he continues to indulge Dignan's fantasies, even after a heist gone wrong at the film's climax. Anthony knows the damage their co-dependent relationship can do; but he needs it to survive.

### **Rushmore**

While *Rushmore* is about a precocious schoolchild, oddly enough his parents are absentee. Protagonist Max is a scholarship boarder, suggesting his parents can't afford school tuition and aren't nearby; they are physically and socially removed from Max's world. As such, he reaches out for new family. He becomes infatuated with a teacher, Rosemary, and tries to impress her with childish showmanship. Max becomes friends with a father-figure, Mr. Blume, regardless of his own family. Meanwhile, Rosemary and Mr. Blume start a relationship to escape from their dissatisfying lives, her from loneliness and he from a family that doesn't offer any emotional support. This bizarre love triangle speaks to each character's focus on finding family in one another. Hancock further asserts this point, saying "Mr. Blume recognizes in Max something special..."

a lust for life despite a failing family.' Without acceptance into a group, the characters in *Rushmore* can't lust for life.

### **The Grand Budapest Hotel**

Vreeland summates *The Grand Budapest Hotel* succinctly, 'Monsieur Gustave, a man who trained for years without a family to become the hotel concierge, finds solace in Zero Moustafa, the immigrant lobby boy also without a family.' The parent-child dynamic is clear, but the pairs' attempts to find family run deeper. Gustave's penchant for older women speaks to a latent Oedipal complex, and his relationships with multiple partners shows his desperation for a mother figure. Zero also has a difficult time. His father figure, Gustave, is killed, and the film's climax foretells his wife and child's death. Neither men can maintain long-term relationships with family figures, and it marks the dynamics of their own comical connection. Both characters enter and leave the narrative alone; but both revel in the joys of family along the way.

### **Isle of Dogs**

The dogs in Wes Anderson's second animated film, *Isle of Dogs*, are divided in how they see family. Exiled to Trash Island at the film's start, most of the dogs are former pets; and while they scavenge in packs, the dogs ultimately only seek companionship for short-term survival. Many of the characters are scarred by their abandonment and distrustful of returning to civilisation. The arrival of the young protagonist, Atari Kobayashi, to find his missing dog resparks a need for family many of the characters had lost. It even affects lifelong stray, Chief, to help the boy and restore dogs' place as 'man's best friend'. The film's epilogue shows many of the dogs returned to their homes or adopted into new ones, emphasising the role family plays in defining their meaning.

Family bonds are a clear thematic thread running through Anderson's work. Connection is vital to his characters, from friends Dignan and Anthony in *Bottle Rocket* to stray Chief and his human Atari in *Isle of Dogs*, because it defines their individual identities. They are only truly 'themselves' once in a collective. This coming together isn't always obvious - consider Max reconciling with Rosemary at the end of *Rushmore*, or Zero choosing to stay in the crumbling Grand Budapest Hotel - but it offers a sense of new order. As Steven Rybin, writing in *The Films of Wes Anderson...* notes, 'in Anderson's cinema, the formation of family is... a stylish coming-together.' We celebrate his protagonists' unity with family, however that looks, as we would an orchestra's crescendo.

**Works Cited:**

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