As they say, *The Savages* is a small great film. It’s an independent production\(^1\) with a narrow budget that is backed by a compelling script and wonderful actors. No extreme situations are raised, such as euthanasia. However, through a rather simple, ordinary, and common occurrence – the need to take care of an elderly father that begins to suffer dementia – the film invites interesting reflections about the way that our society faces the phenomenon of old age. Setting aside clichés, sentimentality and moralism, *The Savages* demonstrates, in a clever and subtle way, how the test of an illness can become a privileged occasion to rediscover those close to you and to reorient your own existence.

The goal of this study is a narrative and thematic analysis of the film, which will be carried out in two phases. In the first, we will study the structure of the script and describe the main characters and their evolution in the story. In the second phase, once the story is scrutinized, we will delve deep into the thematic aspect and try to elucidate a more abstract level of *The Savages*: what is the meaning of the film and the vision or idea that underlies the story. To the measure that it is pertinent, we will focus on the setting, with more detail on situations, scenes, and moments of dialogue.

After her first feature film, *Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998), Tamara Jenkins received a blind deal proposal from Focus Features to produce something that she would write, with two conditions: that it couldn’t be a period piece and that it had to be funny, though it didn’t have to be a comedy. Jenkins began to work intermittently on what would later become *The Savages*, a story with autobiographical elements. Her parents divorced when she was young and her father took care of her and her three brothers. In the last years of her life, her father suffered dementia and Tamara had to put him in a nursing home and looked after him there. Moreover, one of Tamara’s brothers, Ron Jenkins, teaches theater at Wesleyan University, and they were both rewarded the Guggenheim Fellowship. Tamara also began her career in the theatrical world in downtown New York. But the similarities end there: she was never in Buffalo or Sun City, and the relationship with her brothers is nothing at all as the film represents it.

In 2002, Tamara Jenkins married Jim Taylor, screenwriter and producer (partner of director Alexander Payne, with whom he shared an Oscar for Best Screenplay for *Sideways*). After the honeymoon, Jenkins went to the Yaddo artists’ colony, and there she wrote the first 200-page draft of the script. Later on, the project was interrupted due to casting disagreements: the executives wanted at least one of the brothers to be played by a star, but Jenkins thought otherwise (at that time, Hoffman had not yet won his Oscar for *Capote* and was not considered a celebrity). Linney and Hoffman were among the few names that Jenkins began to shuffle through when the script was ready. When she invited them to her house for a test (until then they had never acted together), she was convinced that the role needed to be for both of them. Not only were they great actors with comic talent, but there was instant chemistry between them, which was necessary for a script that relied so heavily on the interaction of the main characters and what is said between the lines.

With the pull-out of Focus Features, Jenkins began to shop the script around until finally an independent company, Lone Star, accepted to finance half of the budget. Then Fox Searchlight decided to join the project, thanks to the backing of Ad Hominem, the company belonging to Alexander Payne, Jim Burke and Jim Taylor (Jenkins’ husband), which were listed in the credits as executive producers. Focus Searchlight gave the go-ahead in 2008. The film was shot in a short 30-day span, with locations in New York and Arizona, on a modest budget (according to Hollywood standards) of 8 million dollars.

*The Savages* received two Oscar nominations in 2008 for Best Original Screenplay.
and Best Actress, and one nomination for Best Actor in a Comedy in the Golden Globes of that same year. It won the Independent Spirit Award 2008 for Best Screenplay and Best Actor, and the AFI Award granted by the American Film Institute for Best Film of the Year.

2. SYNOPSIS

In Sun City, Arizona, idyllic city for retirees, the elderly Lenny Savage writes on the bathroom wall with his feces. We understand that he has lost his mind. Soon afterwards, his companion Doris dies and he is left alone. His children, Wendy (39 years old) and Jon (42), whom Lenny abandoned many years ago and currently live far away in New York City and Buffalo, need to take care of him.

Wendy does not have a fixed job. She claims to have received the Guggenheim Fellowship to complete a theatrical work she is writing. Inspired by her childhood, it’s about two brothers who, abandoned by their mother, must cope with an abusive father. Jon teaches Theater of the Absurd in a university and is preparing a book about Bertolt Brecht. Both live alone: Wendy has a relationship with an older married man, Larry, who always visits her with his dog Marley; Jon has a Polish girlfriend, Kasia, whom he decides not to marry and who must return to her country due to an expired visa. The Savage siblings admit their father to Valley View, a nursing home in Buffalo. In order to care for him, they decide to live together in Jon’s house, but each one minding their own business. Wendy is shown as quite diligent: she tries to enroll her father in a better residence, Greenhill Manor, and when they reject him for his dementia, she transforms his room at Valley View to make it more welcoming and homey. She breaks it off with Larry, and then Jon discovers that she lied and never received the Guggenheim scholarship, but rather an aid for 9/11 victims. Constantly searching for affection, she throws herself in the arms of Jimmy, the male nurse who looks after her father. However, he rejects her.

After a quick agony, the father dies with the children at his bedside and each one returns to their previous lives. Wendy receives a last visit from Larry, who tells her that the following day they will kill his dog Marley because he suffers from an incurable hip problem. Six months later in New York, Jon is touched by a rehearsal for Wendy’s production and bids her farewell as he leaves for Poland to participate in a conference and reconnect with Kasia, and Wendy goes running with Marley, who follows her in a walker with wheels that sustains his hip.

3. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The movie has a rather simple lineal structure. It is a typical character-driven story (as opposed to a plot-driven story) in which characters prevail over events. What gives the story depth and interest is not so much what happens, as is the description, the development and the transformation of the two main characters. According to Robert McKee’s classification, it would be a miniplot\(^6\) story.

To discover the story’s essential structure, we should draw attention to the main actions, without which the story could not be told:

1) The father suffers dementia;
2) The children who left and live far away put him into a nursing home and care for him there;
3) The father dies and the children return to their previous lives as changed people.

These would be the three pillars that sustain the “bridge”, the structure without which the construction of the narrative would crumble. The story’s trigger, which some call the *catalyst* and other the *initial incident* or the *hook*, would be the moment in which the father writes an obscenity with his excrements on the bathroom wall, a sign that he has started to lose his mind (minute 4). The first *plot-point* or *turning-point* comes when the children admit their father into Valley View (minute 35). It could be said that the second plot-point begins when Lenny curls his toes in (minute 90), a sign that his agony towards death is underway. (According to the explanation Jimmy gives to Wendy, this means that the spirit has begun to leave the body.)

Following this analysis, the structure would be composed of three fairly clear acts. The first, a little over a half-hour long, takes place in Sun City: the siblings reunite to take care of their father, right after the death of his companion Doris. The second act, about an hour long, explores the relationship between Wendy and Jon, with their father admitted to the nursing home in Buffalo. The third, lasting roughly 15 minutes, narrates the outcome and introduces a climax in the story (the death of Lenny) and a resolution: both children return to their lives. Six months later, a sort of epilogue is added in which the two reunite for Wendy’s rehearsal and Jon’s farewell. Wendy is then shown jogging with Marley, who has survived his hip problem.

Along with the main plot, a consistent sub-plot runs throughout the entire story: the relationship between Wendy and Larry. Two other sub-plots ought to be mentioned as well: the relationships established between Wendy and Jimmy, and Jon and Kasia. The three sub-plots, based on few events, underpin the structure of the film, intensify or solidify its framework, and endow the main characters with greater complexity and depth.

4. Wendy

Even though the main roles are divided between the two siblings, it is fair to say that Wendy has a more leading role. She appears almost at the beginning, she closes the movie, she takes the initiative and is present in the majority of the footage, and she even predominates most of the sub-plots. The viewer follows the story from her viewpoint.

Wendy is an attractive, sensible, 39 year-old woman who lives alone and takes care of a cat named Genghis and a ficus tree. She dreams of being a writer and winning a scholarship that allows her complete a theatrical work inspired by her childhood. She maintains a superficial and grotesque, emotional relationship with a 52 year-old lover named Larry. Neither of the two wants to neither commit to the relationship nor lose their status: he doesn’t want to separate from his wife and she doesn’t want to renounce her independence.

Wendy is a woman in the height of a mid-life crisis, with a tremendous need for acknowledgement of her talents, affection and consolation (she lies to Larry about the results of medical tests so that he has pity on her). As any good artist/writer, she is creative, witty, and... a dreamer. Her brother accuses her of being unrealistic, selfish, and living a fantasy. Larry accuses her of betraying herself. Both of them help her to “wake
up”. Jimmy also helps her, though indirectly, when she suddenly kisses him and he immediately pushes her away, apologizing because he has a girlfriend whom he loves. Touché.

Out of these three moments of self-revelation (with Jon, Larry, and Jimmy), the most definitive is, without a doubt, the conversation with Larry. To contextualize, we remember that Larry came to visit her, and after an outing to the Niagara Falls, they end up in a motel room. Suddenly, Wendy flicks on the lights, gets out of bed, and begins to allude to how pathetic the situation is: she is having an affair with a married man that is significantly much older. It’s a rather long discussion, not absent of humor, in which Larry at one point laments:

– You do this all the time. You insult me by telling me I’m having a midlife crisis here… when you’re the one having an affair with a married guy… instead of seeking real intimacy with someone available for real commitment.

Wendy then defends herself by saying that she is not married, and therefore is not betraying anyone. But Larry shoots back:

– Only yourself.

Along with selfishness, lack of commitment and fear, Wendy does manifest positive qualities, such as sensitivity and tenderness. She affectionately kisses her father on his forehead, and she gets emotional when she discovers photos of her and her brother in his suitcase. Deep down inside, she recognizes that there are more important things to life than work, concretely, love (as she explicitly tells her brother during an odd game of tennis). She realizes that they can no longer forget their father, even though he abandoned them their entire lives; doing so would be behaving like “monsters”. This is the sensation she is left with when they take him to Valley View. Heartbroken, she exclaims over and over again to her brother, “We are horrible, horrible, horrible people. We are horrible!” This is why she is determined to find a better quality home, Greenhill Manor. When she discovers that it is not an option, she buys a rug, a red cushion and a designer lamp, and with all of her female sensibility tries to make over his room in Valley View.

Both Jon and Wendy desire to take care of their father in a way that allows them to finish their respective tasks (he, the book, and she, the script). However what both of them need (though they may not realize it) is not so much to finish their work, as to get out of themselves, give themselves to others, and regain control of their own lives. And they do. Wendy cuts things off with Larry and Jon goes in search of Kasia. The adversary or antagonist of Wendy is Jon and the adversary or antagonist of Jon is Wendy. This rivalry is caused by their common interests, their mutual attempts to get the other to take care of Lenny, and the different approaches to managing the situation: Wendy insists on finding another place while Jon believes that Valley View is the better option.

Lenny is simultaneously an adversary and an ally for both Wendy and Jon. He’s the source of the “problem”; but at the same time, he is the one who makes them change, and without trying, “educates” them (something he never did in the past). In this regard, Andrea Valagussa put it well when he said that “what Lenny never gave to his children as a father, he paradoxically gave them as a ‘child’ that needed to be cared for, cleaned, watched over. Thanks to this uncomfortable mission, the two siblings are forced to

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become responsible, make decisions, act like adults [...]. Lenny dies having fulfilled, without realizing it, his role as educator."

Larry is another adversary and ally for Wendy. On one hand, he contributes to her pathetic situation. On the other hand, by telling her the truth – that she is betraying herself – he pushes her to leave her complacency and take some important decisions to reorient her life.

Both siblings are in fact quite similar, as both are writers and intellectuals. Even their humor has an intellectual thread. When Wendy wakes him up to tell him that their father has dementia and he is lost somewhere in the desert of Arizona, Jon calms her saying: “We’re not in a Sam Shepard’s play”.

In the end, they make a pathetic and fun couple. There are numerous situations in which their behavior or appearance causes laughter. For example, when they show up at the house in Sun City with flowers and a balloon, or the tennis match and the way that Jon treats his neck wound. The red cushion incident is also quite comical: Wendy searches all over for this red cushion until she discovers that an elderly woman has it on her wheelchair and has to take it from her by force. But perhaps the clearest expression of this comic dimension takes place when they arrive late for the support group meeting: they go to the back of the room, begin eating the cookies for the coffee-break until they are caught red-handed. Everyone turns around to look at them, and they freeze until Jon sneakily puts the two bitten cookies back onto the table.

Like Wendy, Jon also seeks acknowledgement for what destiny has unjustly denied him. As such, he can’t hide his jealousy towards his sister when she tells him, lying, that she got the Guggenheim Fellowship. Also like Wendy, Jon suffers in his loneliness. He has a rather superficial, affective relationship with his Polish girlfriend Kasia: this is proven by the fact that he doesn’t decide to propose to her and lets her return to Poland when her visa expires.

Jon is more practical and realistic than Wendy, with both feet on the ground and his head less in the clouds. He has the same affective needs as her, though he resists to recognize it and minimizes his situation. He avoids talking about his feelings, but he cries at night when he’s on the phone with Kasia, and over breakfast before taking her to the airport. Jon tries to convince himself that there are “practical considerations” that are more important than love. He explains this to Wendy while they are playing tennis, but after hearing his speech with detailed reasoning, she dryly responds, “You’re an idiot”. Jon is just as selfish as Wendy, but their father’s situation and his sister’s persistence brings out the best in him, though reluctantly. At the same time, he also recognizes that abandoning Lenny would be savage when he says, “Hey, we’re doing the right thing, Wen. We’re taking better care of the old man that he ever did of us”.

Apart from the occasional moments of tension, the relationship between the siblings is good. You can see that the hardships they faced in childhood has helped them to remain close, even though later on in life they end up in different places and the walls they’ve built have created a greater separation between them than should be. But there’s

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5. Jon

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trust, a lot of it; and mutual understanding. In the end, Jon sincerely appreciates Wendy’s work, as shown when he gets emotional at the rehearsal for her theatrical work. A solid, authentic, deeply rooted affection exists between them.

The movie doesn’t really specify in which ways Lenny failed in his obligations as father. We know that once they were abandoned by their mother, Lenny was abusive towards them. This is inferred from Wendy’s theatrical work by the off stage summary and rehearsal, where you see the father hitting his children; and at the end, when Wendy apologizes to Jon for having used biographical elements. We also know that Lenny ended up abandoning the children in some way, or he simply stopped caring for them. In this regard, Wendy ironically comments to her brother, “Maybe dad didn’t abandon us, maybe he just forgot who we were”.

In Lenny’s defense, you can say that perhaps he himself was mistreated as a child. His reaction during the projection of The Jazz Singer in Valley View suggests this: he gets up out of his chair and violently starts cursing the father that hits his child on the screen, believing to see the representation of his own past. Obviously, this does not exempt him from responsibility for his erratic behavior, to which his children have responded sort of indifferently. For years, there has hardly been communication among them, nor does there seem to have been much communication between the siblings (though this was not due to anything in particular except for life’s circumstances and in part, to a certain blatant disinterest). For this reason, when Wendy listens to the message in the answering machine informing her that her father is in the early stages of dementia and there is no one to take care of him, her first reaction is not so much of pity, rather of disturbance for the weight being put on her shoulders. In perceiving the indolence of her brother Jon on the other end of the phone, she yells, “Do not leave me alone with this!”

The interesting part of this film is precisely that these two shipwrecks, in full blown mid-life crises, all alone, with their lives a mess, with the weight of a sad childhood, feel the duty to accompany the person who contributed to the bitterness of their existence, but who nevertheless is still their father at the end of the day. Therefore, he must have done something good, even if it was only to give them life. They feel indebted to him. Their decision honors them, and it becomes even more meritorious if we consider that they don’t expect anything in exchange. Their father perhaps isn’t capable of demonstrating his gratitude, and sometimes, he gives the impression that he doesn’t even notice them.

In her review published in Sight & Sound, Kate Stables said that The Savages “may be the first baby-boomer movie to portray the ubiquitous, unglamorous realities of elder care”³⁹. Further on, she states that a nice facet of the film is “Jenkins’ eschewal of the inevitable inter-generational rapprochements that the litter Hollywood movie deathbeds. Lenny turns up his toes (literally, in the film’s blackest running gag) without his children ever broaching or forgiving him for the abusive childhood that is alluded to but thankfully never excavated on screen. But the film retains a quirky, uplifting quality that suggests that the Savages’ decision to ‘take better care of him than he ever did of us’ begins their overdue liberation as adults, even as they row at his bedside like squabbling

toddler's. It’s true: their generosity changes them, leads them to maturity, frees them and makes them more responsible, as we have already explained.

7. ELOQUENT SILENCES

Stylistically, the staging of The Savages serves the story in a sober, clever and effective way. The sun, the pastel colors, the somewhat surreal scenery of Sun City contrast the realistic setting and the gray tones of Buffalo, where time is severe and the penumbra predominates. Not much is needed to convey Jenkins’ sad and decadent situation. For example, when Jon and Wendy find their father tied down in the hospital with the container of urine hanging from the bed, the pathos of the scene is notably accentuated by a depressing television advertisement for detergent.

What perhaps calls most attention, in a script full of brilliant dialogues, is the intelligent use of silences that here and there mark the movie and aptly convey the meditative tone of reflection and crisis that runs through the entire script. This silences, highly eloquent and evocative, put us in the character’s shoes. Beyond their ambiguous interpretation, which increase their value, they have the ability to transmit a vague tone, a feeling that can be understood only in the context and the circumstances of the scene and the story, through the gestures and the expressions of the actors. These silences can provoke a state of mind that moves between remorse, repentance, fragility, disorientation or even emptiness. Sometimes, on the other hand, they serve to indicate a kind of epiphany, the recognition of truth, beauty, harmony or interior peace. It’s difficult to put into words, but we’re sure the reader will understand what we’re saying, if he watches what we consider the most significant silent moments of the movie, noted below:

– Wendy, after having gathered her father’s belongings, returns to her hotel in a taxi. She looks out the window, the sun illuminates her melancholic expression, and she falls asleep.
– The three of them in the car from the airport going towards Valley View, under the rain.
– Jon driving in his car to the university, wearing a neck brace, while he sings along to The Threepenny Opera. It’s a particularly lyrical moment and he seems happy, maybe due to the effects of the music or the painkillers he has just taken. But most probably it’s for the recent agreement established with his sister for the two of them to live together in his apartment. The camera then alternates to close-ups with Jon at the wheel, the bare trees, the green and amber traffic lights, and the sneakers hanging from the electrical cables along the streets.
– The father in the car, while the children argue outside, at the end of the visit to Greenhill Manor.
– The father in the car after turning off his hearing aid so as not to listen to his children’s discussion about the Guggenheim scholarship. He is looking out the window, with a profoundly sad facial expression, similar to when he was at Greenhill Manor. At certain moments, the viewer can clearly detect – in his gaze and in his silence – the pity and remorse for not having been a good father.
– While Jon is teaching class, after having received the call from Valley View. A student asks him something and he looks at her, lost in thought.

10 Stables, “The Savages”, 84.
– Jon and Wendy caring for their father during his agony, and standing by his bedside after he just died.
– Wendy and Jon in the car after the death of their father.
– Wendy returning home by train, and Jon back in his studio at home.
These are very natural moments, normally accompanied by Stephen Trask’s fitting music which, far from disrupting the scenes, helps the viewer to penetrate the psychology of the characters in the film.

8. Dying Anonymously

Once Jon and Wendy have enrolled their father into Valley View, they have to make him sign a living will. They bring him to a modest restaurant, and with more than slight embarrassment, Wendy tries to raise the question… but she feels incapable of continuing. Jon relieves her and gets straight to the point: if you are in an extreme situation, do you want us to unplug you? And once you are dead, do you prefer to be burned or buried? Lenny, confused though lucid at the time, is left petrified and shocked. He responds furiously, “What kind of question is that? What are you, a bunch of idiots? You bury me!”

Francesco D’Agostino pointed to this scene as the heart of the entire movie, since it “highlights the level of unconsciousness and probably blameless intensity that the process of bureaucratization of death, which characterizes the years in which we live, has reached.” According to D’Agostino the scene also emphasizes the distance between the theoretical consideration of a living will and its practical application, “the patient required to sign the living will is a frightened, fragile, and in the majority of cases, extremely elderly person who is psychologically alone, anguished over economic and family problems, uncertain about his future, and above all, needs to be lightened of the weight of decisions that surpass him. He is often in a state of mental confusion, willing to let himself be convinced not by what appears to be fair, but by what is rhetorically presented as most convincing.”

But the aforementioned scene is not the only incident that underlines the anomalous relationship that our society has with the third stage of life, aging, and death. The film is not just about bureaucratization that has resulted in invading this vital space, but also about anonymity in which today, unfortunately very often, people die. Both realities, bureaucratization and anonymity, are obviously closely connected and deal with the prevailing pragmatism of personal relationships. If it wasn’t for the help of his children, Lenny Savage would run the risk of dying alone and abandoned, which seems paradoxical for a person who has been married, had children, and for the last twenty years has lived complacently with a partner whose family has accompanied him. Even though Lenny may be the first culprit of the situation he is in, one shouldn’t ignore the

11 An in-deep and recent explanation of the bioethical issues touched in this article, their influence in today’s society and the threat posed to the sacredness of human life, can be found in: P. Requena, La sacralità della vita: serve ancora per la bioetica?, Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2013. Other interesting works regarding the end of life and euthanasia in our society are: J. Keown, Euthanasia. Ethics and Public Policy. An Argument against Legislation, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; and J. Dacok S.J., La postmodernità nel dibattito bioetico: il caso delle questioni di fine vita, Trnava, Slovacchia: Dobrá Kniha, 2007.
13 Ibid., 143.
fact that he is simultaneously the victim of a vicious and selfish social system, which is paying the consequences for a progressive weakening of the family institution.

The movie indirectly criticizes the difficulty with which our society faces the phenomenon of death. That vintage environment of Sun City, with its cookie-cutter houses, palm trees and golf courses, with the elderly happily playing bocce or leisurely riding their bikes, where 60’s music is constantly heard and the old ladies do their nails as if they were young women, conveys quite an unreal and disturbing sensation. This atmosphere is mocked in the slow-motion opening scene with not-so-young ballerinas coming out from behind hedges in a synchronized choreography. A criticism of society’s hypocrisy and attempt to hide death by looking away when it’s approaching, escapes Jon’s lips at the end of the visit to Greenhill Manor. After having accused his sister of insisting on bringing their father there to remedy her guilt complex, he asserts, “all this wellness propaganda and the landscaping is just there to obscure the miserable fact that people die!”

9. HUMANIZATION THROUGH CARE

What does *The Savages* tell us? What is it really about, what is the idea that underlies the story, what is the controlling idea\(^\text{14}\), to use Robert McKee’s expression? In view of what has been presented thus far, I think that it can be said like this: care humanizes. Or more specifically: care of the elderly humanizes. This was probably Tamara Jenkins’ experience when she needed to care for her father. In any case, it’s the idea transmitted here. Said negatively, it can be expressed like this: a society that does not care for its elderly is an inhumane society.

The movie can be classified as a dramedy: a drama with a comedic tone. Pathetic “savage” behavior is described with irony. The author portrays the siblings with tenderness and understanding, capturing the viewers’ sympathy. Nevertheless, Jon and Wendy are like disoriented animals seeking redemption and humanity in the midst of an absurd society that is so used to such inhumane procedures that are no longer questioned.

In this sense, it’s true that the movie shows as natural some clearly immoral forms of behavior: extramarital relations are never really questioned, and euthanasia is seen as a “normal” possibility. But we can say that, apart from this, the “message” that reaches the spectator is, on the whole, positive. The film suggest that a society of broken families involves a disregard for children and eventually for the elderly. This is why it can be defined as a savage society that is devoid of personal relationships, where each person minds his own business. A society that is eminently pragmatic, in which wellbeing and search for success prevail. A society where you die anonymously.

The *Savages*, Jon and Wendy, are formed according to this mold (as is their father, Lenny). But the test to which they are subject forces them to get out of their own worlds, reencounter and reconcile with their father and with themselves. Apparently, there are no big changes, but beneath the surface, there certainly are. They have gained humanity. Their perspective has changed. They’ve become less alone than they were in the beginning; each one counts more on the closeness of the other; they are more conscious of their precarious situations and they mutually help each other to face these. Jon is capable of embarking upon a trip (using a conference as his excuse) to see his girlfriend. Wendy decides to break things off with her lover. She seems to have learned to not force things

\(^{14}\) Cfr. McKee, *Story*, 114-120.
with her imagination, to take life as it comes, to accept it with imperfections, to help the other to walk if they can’t run. At the end of the movie, Wendy has converted into a caretaker (she cared for her father and now she looks after Marley, Larry’s dog): into someone capable of having compassion upon the fragility of the other and come to their aid, as the last scene metaphorically illustrates.

SUMMARY

The present work studies the film The Savages (Jenkins, 2007), the story of two siblings, Jon and Wendy, who, in the midst of their mid-life crises, find themselves needing to care for their elderly father Lenny as he begins to lose his mind. The narrative structure and the characters are first analyzed, in order to later develop the thematic dimension of the film. Other aspects regarding style and staging are considered insofar as they relate to the narrative structure, such as the brilliant dialogues or the eloquent silences that aptly convey the meditative tone of reflection that runs through the entire script.

The movie indirectly criticizes the anomalous relationship that our society has with death. In this sense, it’s about the bureaucratization that has invaded the third stage of life, but also about the anonymity in which today, unfortunately very often, people die. It suggests that a society of broken families involves a disregard for children and eventually for the elderly. Jon and Wendy are “savage”, as their surname suggests; they behave like disoriented animals seeking redemption and humanity in the midst of an absurd society accustomed to such inhumane procedures that are no longer questioned. But the test they go through forces them to get out of their own worlds and reencounter and reconcile with their father and with themselves.

At the end, the siblings have changed their perspective. They are more mature. What they have gained is humanity. It can be said that the idea which underlies the entire story is care humanizes, or more specifically, care of the elderly humanizes. Seen in another light, a society in which the elderly are not cared for is an inhumane, savage society.