

BEING THERE

A Study in Simplicity, Perception and Symbolism

Richard Moe

Life is something which is not easily definable. It is something which we are all very much aware of and probably even take for granted, but at the same time something which we all perceive differently from one another. How we live and what we do with our lives, and especially our perceptions of this, is the foundation of our very being. Life, however, is not always what we imagine it to be. While some of us are inspired and draw strength from our perceptions and experiences, others of us become weak and disillusioned. Life then, is pretty much what we make of it; it is a state of mind. In many respects the story *Being There* is like that.

Written by Jerzy Kosinski in 1970, *Being There* was made into a movie of the same name ten years later. Kosinski also wrote the screenplay for that movie. Unlike most movie adaptations of novels which tend to be abridged or simplified, the motion picture version of *Being There* is just the opposite. Through the excellent performances of the entire cast, the characters in the movie are developed more thoroughly than in the book and the entire story is underscored with a symbolism which is not apparent in the novel.

The story is about the events which lift a middle-aged illiterate man from a position of secluded obscurity to one of national prominence and importance in the course of a few days. As if to underscore the fateful nature of events that are to affect him, the central character is named Chance “because he had been born by chance.” His background is obscure and the total of his recollections center around the large house and garden, from which he had never set foot.

The words that the Old Man had spoken to him the first time had wormed their way into his memory like firm roots. Chance was an orphan, and it was the Old Man himself who had sheltered him in the house ever since Chance was a child. Chance’s mother had died when he was born. No one, not even the Old Man, would tell him who his father was. While some could learn to read and write, Chance would never be able to manage this. Nor would he ever be able to understand much of what others were saying to him or around him. Chance was to work in the garden, where he would care for plants and grasses and trees which grew there peacefully. He would be as one of them; quiet, openhearted in the sunshine and heavy when it rained. ¹

From the onset of the story the reader is led to believe that chance, if not somewhat retarded, is at least a very simple

soul whose only interests are the garden he has tended and TV which he constantly watches when he is not working. These are the only two things to which he can relate. In the garden Chance felt secure that within it he could move “in his own time, like the growing plants,” without concern to the direction in which he wandered. Gardening was something he could be comfortable with.

When not gardening he was watching TV and it influenced him in another way. There was no natural cycle, as in the garden, and everything on it was a mixture of opposites which did not conflict. Watching TV he could change himself by merely switching the dial. He could imagine himself changing as the images on TV and thus “he came to believe that it was he, Chance, and no one else, who made himself be.” TV was the only window to that world outside the garden which Chance had never seen and the images it projected were ones which he could then fit himself into. He became one with what he saw with the result being that though he “could not read or write, he resembled the man on TV more than he differed from him.”

He sank into the screen. Like sunlight and fresh air and mild rain, the world from outside the garden entered Chance, and Chance, like a TV image, floated into the world, buoyed up by a force he did not see and could not name. ²

In the movie, the importance the garden and TV have for

Chance is underscored by his frequent reference to gardening and the almost constant presence of TV. While the importance of each to Chance are clearly stated in the novel, in the movie this importance is noticed by observing Chance. The movie is able to provide an added dimension which the novel does not. Whereas the type of programs which Chance happens to watch are not mentioned in the novel, they are recognizable in the movie version. By carefully noting the content of these brief segments appearing on the TV, the viewer is provided with extra bits of sensory data and these play an important role in influencing the viewer's impressions of Chance.

The very first scene at the beginning of the movie is a good example. The movie begins with a scene of a bedroom in the morning. The TV set at the foot of the bed turns itself on automatically to show an orchestra playing music and this awakens the main character, Chance. Rising, he first walks to his bureau, picks up a silver-backed hair brush, steps back a bit, neatly brushes his hair, and then replaces the brush. Next he picks up a potted plant on the TV set, takes it over to a table by the window and sets it down. He then takes a plant from the table and puts it on the TV set where the other one had been. With a movement indicative of ingrained routine, all Chance's actions thus far seem methodical and set. Nothing about his expression or behavior to this point would suggest anything out of the ordinary.

The scene cuts to the TV to show the conductor conducting the orchestra and then to another one of Chance, still in his

pajamas but now with an apron on, watering flowers in another area. Other than the fact that there is another TV set turned on in the distance, the picture image distorted, and in fact apparently ignored, everything seems quite normal and Chance appears to be just another person with an interest in flowers.

Once again there is a cut to the orchestra and then back to Chance who is now seen dusting a very shiny but old model automobile. As the camera follows Chance's dusting movements from the top of the car downwards, we realize as the tires come into view that they are flat and appear to have been in that condition for quite some time. That Chance dusts them as he did the rest of the car indicates to us that he apparently is unconcerned with their flattened state. This is odd since most people would have no reason for allowing a car to sit in one place on tires that had gone flat because of the harm it causes both the tires and the tire rims. The fact that the automobile is an old one, a collector's item, further underlines this point since one would presumably be more inclined to take care of it.

The scene again switches back to the orchestra and then to Chance sitting at a table watching the TV. He then changes channels and a cartoon appears. Chance's expression throughout all this has remained much the same, but then again since he is alone, that is something we probably would expect. That he seems addicted to watching TV does not really strike us as odd or unusual since it is not uncommon to find people around us who pass a great deal of time each day planted in front of

the TV.

Without interest in or knowledge of classical music, the piece being played by the orchestra on TV all throughout the opening of the movie while the titles fade in and fade out may go unrecognized by the viewer. However, recognizing the piece as Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" the viewer may, as the movie proceeds, wonder if that particular piece was selected as a subtle inference to Chance's own rather incomplete nature.

Throughout the movie there are numerous occasions where the program on TV bears an uncanny similarity to the events at hand or those about to occur. At these times our attention is consciously drawn to the dialogue or action of the characters in that particular scene and we are inclined to only imperceptibly notice that the TV is on, though probably not recognize exactly what is being shown. In spite of its apparent distraction, the contents of the TV program are registered in our subconscious and thus subtly influence our overall impression. At other times programs provide a subtle counterpoint of parody by having as their theme an aspect relevant to the situation at hand. The next two scenes in the movie, where Louise enters, and the scene following it where Chance goes upstairs to the Old Man's room, are good examples of this.

After Chance changes channels, he watches part of a weather report before again switching channels. The report is about heavy snow storms hitting parts of the country. It is at this point when Louise the maid enters to tell Chance that the Old Man is dead. This is Chance's first dialogue and from his

exchange with Louise the viewer may begin to feel that perhaps Chance is not all there. While their conversation is taking place, the viewer may recognize the voice on the TV as belonging to Big Bird, the large yellow bird that appeared on *Sesame Street*, a popular children's program. Big Bird has a very child-like quality and often reacts to situations differently than one would normally imagine, but this is what endears him to those around him. At this early stage in the movie, however, with attention focused on Chance's and Louise's conversation, the parallel between the simplistic behavior of Chance and that of Big Bird is not consciously drawn. Overlapping one another, our attention is focused on what Louise is saying to Chance while we tend to ignore the brief snatches of audible dialogue from the TV program.

This segment, from the moment Chance switches channels to *Sesame Street* until he next appears going upstairs to the Old Man's room, provides an interesting example of this interplay between the dialogue of the main characters with what is appearing on the TV at the same time.

BIG BIRD : . . . your friends out here, friends. Ha ! I have no friends.

WOMAN : Oh, Big Bird, we came to see you drive.

Louise enters.

BIG BIRD : It's a little too late now, isn't it ?

MAN : Well, Big Bird, how about letting. . .

CHANCE : Good morning, Louise.

LOUISE : He's dead, Chance. The Old Man's dead.

Louise sits at table with Chance.

CHANCE : I see.

LOUISE : He wasn't breathing. And as cold as a fish. I touched him, just to see.

WOMAN : I came to see you. . .

LOUISE : Chance, . . .

BIG BIRD : Are you sure you could spare the time ? I'm surprised you have any time at all.

LOUISE : Then I. . . covered him up. Pulled a sheet over his head. Oh, Lord ! What a morning !

CHANCE : Yes, Louise. It looks like it's going to snow. Have you seen the garden ? It feels just like it's going to snow.

LOUISE : Damn it, boy.

WOMAN : But I love you, too.

LOUISE : Is that all you've got to say ?

WOMAN : See, that's the way it works.

LOUISE : That old man lying up there dead as hell and it just don't make any difference to you.

BIG BIRD : I'm not sure I understand.

LOUISE : Oh, Lord, Chance. . .

WOMAN : (Beginning to sing a song about love) "I love you. . ."

LOUISE : Chance. . . I'm sorry for yelling like I did.

Louise stands by Chance; puts hand on his shoulder.

LOUISE : No, sir. . . I just don't know what I was expecting.

Shot of Woman singing and Big Bird on TV.

WOMAN : "Different people, different ways. . ."

LOUISE : Suppose I better gather you up some breakfast.

CHANCE : Oh, yes, please. I'm very hungry, Louise.

WOMAN : "But I love you. . ."

LOUISE : I'll make you some eggs.

WOMAN : "Sugar and spice are awfully nice."

BIG BIRD : "Tiny and small and yellow and tall are. . ."

Shot of TV again.

WOMAN : "Everyone loves through all their days. Different people. . ."

Chance switches channels.

CAPT. KANGAROO : There are lots of animals in the barnyard. Want to go with the rooster and see them? Cockadoodle doo. Cockadoodle doo. Cockadoodle doo.

From the moment Louise enters the room, her expression and manner indicate her shock in finding the Old Man dead. Chance's brief comment of "I see," and his unfazed reaction to this bit of news, talking instead about the weather, show his inability to fully comprehend the seriousness of the news Louise has just brought. It further gives example of Chance's habit of repeating or using an expression or gesture that he has seen on TV. This habit becomes even more apparent as the movie proceeds. Momentarily Louise becomes angry, but then realizes that she had made the mistake of talking to Chance as though he were normal, or capable of understanding what she was saying. Her tone softens, she apologizes, and she rises and places her hand on his shoulder in an affection-

ate gesture, one which a mother might use towards an innocent child.

Throughout Chance's and Louise's exchange we can hear Big Bird first talking petulantly like a child who has been offended or hurt because he feels neglected. The woman who has come to visit Big Bird attempts to explain something to him, perhaps the reason why she had been away. Big Bird says he can't understand and this prompts the woman to sing a song about love and people being different. In the middle of this song, Chance switches to another channel, one that by chance happens to be another popular children's show, Captain Kangaroo. The picture shows Capt. Kangaroo's hand holding a doll rooster while he comments that "there are lots of animals in the barnyard" and invites the viewers to come and see them.

From *Sesame Street* we know Big Bird to be innocent and ignorant of many things in a child-like way and our mind perhaps draws an unconscious parallel between him and Chance in view of his reaction to the news of the death of the Old Man. Yet, at the same time, the song that the woman and Big Bird sing about love and people being different prevent our reaction towards Chance's indifference from turning to scorn. Coinciding as it does with Louise's conciliatory and compassionate gesture, we can sense a similar maternal love on her part for Chance as well as an awareness and acceptance that he is different. Her exit and the switch to Captain Kangaroo expand on this concept that not only are people different, but there are a lot of different kinds of people out

there in the world just as there are many kinds of animals in the barnyard. And just as Capt. Kangaroo is about to take his viewing audience into the barnyard to meet all sorts of new animals, Chance, and we who are observers of the drama around him unfolding, unknowingly will soon be drawn out into the world beyond the Old Man's house and garden where Chance will then meet all sorts of people.

The scene after Capt. Kangaroo is of Chance going up to the Old Man's room. He enters the room, pauses solemnly a moment and then pulls the sheet down from the Old Man's face and puts his hand on the Old Man's forehead for a moment before taking it away. He then sits down on the edge of the bed facing away from the Old Man and looks briefly about the room. Picking up the remote control unit for the TV from the bedside table, he switches on the TV. A commercial immediately comes on for a famous mattress brand showing a woman running outdoors and then of her lying on a mattress.

GIRL SINGS : “. . . Sealy Posturepedic morning.”

ANNOUNCER : Feeling so good it shows. Because posturepedic is designed in cooperation with leading orthopedic surgeons for no morning backache from sleeping on a too-soft mattress.

GIRL SINGS : “It's a Sealy Posturepedic morning.”

Both Chance's response that it looks like it is going to snow to Louise's exclamation of, “Lord ! What a morning !”, and

the TV commercial's cheery hyperbole about "Posturepedic Mornings" convey the same subtle unintended irony. From the weather report of terrible snow storms we can assume that it must be the middle or "dead" of winter. The benefits of this particular mattress are a deep and peaceful sleep, one which in informal conversation is sometimes referred to as "a sleep of the dead." Chance seems no more impressed by news of the Old Man's death and seeing him lying dead in bed than he is by the weather and the mattress commercial.

Chance changes channels and a scene from an old black and white movie about the ante-bellum South comes on. In the foreground there is a horse-drawn carriage with an old black slave sitting in the driver's seat. In the background two genteel southern ladies are seen going up to the door of a house, having just gotten down from the carriage. As they are walking, one of the ladies is giving orders to the black driver who responds to each with a slight tip of his hat while saying, "Yowser," an expression used by black slaves which meant "Yes, sir." The camera switches to show Chance imitating the black slave's gesture of tipping his own imaginary hat while watching the TV.

The next scene shows Chance, dressed in a handsome suit and expensive hat, working in the garden with an apron on. Walking across the garden, Louise enters the picture and Chance, seeing her, tips his hat and greets her with a "Yowser." Obviously Chance is imitating what he saw on TV and the fact that he says "Yowser" to Louise, the black maid, emphasizes his child-like innocence in using the term "Yow-

ser” which in this present age would be offensive to blacks because of the word’s association with demeaning black servile behavior in the past. Louise, accustomed to Chance, is unfazed by his remark, much as any adult ignores or forgives the inappropriate remarks of children too young or innocent to comprehend what they are saying, while we who are watching all this take place are amused.

We learn from Louise’s conversation that she is leaving the house and saying her good-byes to him. She lightly jokes that he should find himself a lady to take care of him, but from his blank expression it is obvious that he has no idea of what she is talking about. Her next remark, however, is more serious and further strengthens the viewer’s image of Chance being dimwitted.

“You’re always gonna be a little boy, ain’t ya ? ”

It is uttered without the jesting tone of her earlier remark and instead reflects a sadness perhaps based on a sincere concern for his welfare. She then gently kisses Chance and leaves. Chance’s expression, his eyes growing slightly larger when he is kissed, and the long pause before responding with his own “Good-bye,” is one of being somewhat surprised by all this.

Throughout the story there are numerous instances where Chance’s remarks or behavior are interpreted in a manner which is different from the one we form. We viewers have formed a rather simplistic image of Chance from the beginning and thus see him reacting like Big Bird at times while those

to whom he talks assume that he is meaning something else or speaking allegorically. They take his remarks to mean what they want to hear while we the viewers take his remarks literally.

We next see Chance in the room where he normally has his meals. The table and TV are covered with a large sheet. Chance stands for a moment, feels the TV under the dust cover, and then pulls the cover back. The scene switches to the silhouettes of two people entering the house. Upon entering the house they notice the sound of a TV. The camera then shows Chance sitting at the table watching TV. He changes channels from a game show to a news clip of the President in the Oval Office greeting four dignitaries and cultural exchange students from the Republic of China. Seeing the President use two hands to shake hands with the Chinese, Chance clasps his own hands in an imitation of that gesture. It is then with this same gesture that he greets the two strangers who have entered the house, the lawyer Thomas Franklin and his secretary Ms. Hayes, while calling them by their first names. This is a gesture normally used for old acquaintances to indicate pleasure in seeing someone again after a long time.

After the Old Man's death, Chance is forced to leave the house and garden by the lawyer as it is his firm that is handling the Old Man's estate. As Chance prepares to leave the house, he looks around one last time at the only world he has ever known, and the music in the background again provides a statement which we the viewers are unlikely to

perceive. It starts off subtly, a xylophone running chords hinting at the unknown lying beyond the door. As Chance opens the door to the outside world, a drum roll leads up to an upbeat jazz tempo that is joined by guitars and then horns and electric piano all growing to a crescendo as Chance leaves the house. This modern jazz music continues as Chance walks through the city right up to the moment where he is accidentally hit by a limousine and his leg is injured. Seeing the title of this music at the very end of the movie in the credits we might find significance in it. This aspect will be discussed in more detail later.

The woman in the car, Eve, is the young wife of Benjamin Rand, a wealthy and powerful businessman. She insists on taking Chance to a hospital. On their way, however, she persuades Chance to come to her home because there are doctors and nurses there full-time to look after her husband who is old and sick.

Up until this moment the impression we have been given of Chance is that he is very simple and not particularly intelligent. Louise treats him like a child and the lawyer who came to the house and forced Chance to leave deals with him initially skeptically and then bluntly under the assumption that Chance is perhaps an impostor of some sort attempting to make a claim on the Old Man's estate. As he walks aimlessly about the streets of Washington, D.C. he frightens away a black lady walking down the street by asking, "Excuse me. I'm very hungry. Could you give me some lunch?" Since Louise, the black maid, had prepared and

brought him his meals for most of his life, we can understand his associating the black lady carrying what looks like a bag of groceries with food, and at the same time it makes us laugh. Next he stops and asks a street gang of black youths if they could tell him where he could find a garden to work in and they threaten him assuming that he has been sent by the leader of a rival gang. Later he tells a police officer near the White House that a tree is sick and needs to be attended to. Dressed very well it is obvious that the officer doesn't know how to respond to Chance even though the remark strikes him as being odd, and after Chance walks on he reports in. But from the moment Chance's leg is pinned between Eve Rand's limousine and another car, he is treated entirely differently; that is, with deference and respect.

A transformation comes over Chance, created not from within himself, but by the people around him. We continue to see Chance as a simpleton and to be amused by him as he impresses the rich and mighty about him. While to those around him he appears to be a modestly wealthy individual whose remarks are highly regarded and valued by people as important as the president of the United States, we are inclined to be amused since we alone are privy to his prior existence, one that from the beginning we have been conditioned to view as being sheltered and simple.

It is precisely Chance's simple and unpretentious manner and speech which give his wealthy hosts the impression that he is a man of deep inner peace and intelligence. That Chance feels comfortable around them and seems unimpressed by

their tremendous wealth further serves to ingratiate him with them. We who are observing this chain of events continue to be amused and laugh at Chance's antics which appear to go unnoticed by those around him, or better yet, are interpreted as having a deeper significance than the literal meaning at which we interpret them.

Chance's transformation from Chance the gardener to Chauncey Gardiner begins during the ride in Eve's limo. Although we do not notice Chance appearing any differently than he has from the start of the movie, we can nevertheless understand Eve's perception of his behavior as being subdued and dignified. His attire, after all, is not one of a person without some means. Eve makes an attempt at conversation by saying,

“These situations can be so trying. Everyone seems to make such a to-do out of a simple little accident. Is your leg feeling any better ? ”

Chance's polite, but short response of, “No, it isn't,” causes Eve to stop and think of another approach to conversation. Engrossed in her own thoughts, it is obvious that she does not hear Chance's next comment to riding in a car for the very first time in his life that

“This is just like television, only you can see much further.”

Eve next hits upon the idea of inviting Chance to her home

to have his leg attended to. She interprets his almost mechanical response of "I agree," as being an acceptance of her invitation.

EVE : You know, why don't you come to our house and we could take care of you there ?

CHANCE : Your house ?

EVE: Uh huh. My husband has been very ill. The doctor and nurses are staying with him. Hospitals can be so impersonal.

CHANCE : I agree.

EVE : Fine. That'll save a lot of unnecessary fuss and it will be that much more pleasant for you.

Eve instructs one of her chauffeurs to telephone ahead to tell them that they are returning. She then offers Chance a drink. Chance politely accepts the offer remarking that he is very thirsty. Eve opens the limo bar and pours him a brandy. Chance takes the drink and seeing the TV set asks if he can watch television. Eve says, "Certainly," and leans forward and turns it on for him. Just as Eve asks Chance what his name is, he swallows all the brandy as though he were drinking water. This causes him to cough a great deal. Eve pats him on the back. While he is coughing, he replies, "Chance, the gardener." Coughing as he does, though his pronunciation of "the" sounds more like /tsi/.

EVE : Chauncey Gardiner ? Mr. Chauncey Gardiner. Are you

related to Basil and Perdita Gardiner ?

CHANCE : No, I'm not related to Basil and Perdita.

EVE : Well, they are such a wonderful couple. My husband and I are very good friends of theirs. We often visit their island.

CHANCE : Thank you.

Chance hands back glass and fishes in his pockets.

EVE : Did you lose something ?

CHANCE : Yes, I lost my remote control. I use it to change the channels.

EVE : Oh. . . I'm sorry.

Eve presumes Chance's name to be Chauncey Gardiner and immediately asks if he is any relation to friends of theirs. Using only their first names, Basil and Perdita, in his reply would indicate that Chance either knew them or of them since use of first names in American speech implies a degree of familiarity. These are not very common names and that they own an island is some indication of their wealth. Eve thus perhaps presumes Chance to know them since she goes on to tell him what good friends they are. She likewise appears to attribute Chance's remark about losing his remote control for the TV to shock from the accident rather than anything else since it would be inconceivable for a gentleman dressed as well as Chance, someone who was on a first name basis with Basil and Perdita, to walk around with a TV remote control in his pocket.

The Rands assume that Chance has been put out of business

and Ben, impressed by Chance's manner, takes an interest in him both professionally and personally. Their conversation during dinner is a good example of how Chance's remarks are taken in two different ways: figuratively by those with whom he is speaking and literally by us viewers.

EVE : Is there anyone we could notify for you ?

CHANCE : No, the Old Man died and Louise left.

EVE : Oh. I'm. . . I'm very sorry. Well, I do hope your injury won't prevent you from attending to business, Mr. Gardiner.

BEN : Ah. . . do you need a secretary ?

CHANCE : No, thank you. My house was shut down.

BEN : You mean. . . you mean your business was shut down ?

CHANCE : Yes. Shut down and closed by the attorneys.

Ben and Robert express anger with lawyers.

BEN : . . . Well, what are your plans now, Mr. Gardiner ? Or may I call you Chauncey ?

CHANCE : Chauncey's fine.

BEN : So then, what are your plans, Chauncey ?

CHANCE : Well, I would like to work in your garden.

This remark comes as a surprise to Ben, he arches his eyebrows, looks away from Chance and says nothing. But at this moment Eve says that she knows exactly what Chance is saying; that being with trees and flowers is a wonderful way to forget one's troubles. Ben says that he's never had much interest in gardening, but then goes on to use it as an allegory

likening businessmen to gardeners.

CHANCE : I know exactly what you mean, Ben. The garden I left was such a place. But I don't have that anymore. All I have left is the room upstairs.

Chance glances upwards.

BEN : Oh, come on, now. . . wait a minute, Chauncey. You've got your health. For God's sake, man, you can't let those bastards get you down. You got to fight ! I don't want to hear anymore from you about that room upstairs. That's where I'm going, too damn soon.

CHANCE : It's a very pleasant room, Ben.

BEN : I'm sure it is. That's what they say, anyway.

After dinner Ben talks to Chance again and asks him to consider heading a new organization he is thinking of forming to help small businessmen. Again Ben speaks metaphorically using gardening terms to encourage Chance to consider his offer. It becomes apparent, not only from Eve's remarks later that evening to Chance, but also from Ben's invitation to Chance to meet the President with him the next day that Ben has taken a liking to Chance. Before they go to meet the President Ben expresses what it is he likes about him.

BEN : Ah, nobody likes a dying man, Chauncey, because nobody knows what death is. You seem to be an exception, Chauncey. That's one of the things I

admire about you, your admirable balance. You seem to be a truly peaceful man.

Ben decides to walk rather than ride in a wheelchair to meet the President and he puts his arm around Chance's shoulders for support. Walking in this fashion, it would seem to others that Ben and Chance must be very close old friends. Meeting the President, Chance mimics Ben's gestures taking both his hands and shaking them, an action which surprises the President as it would anyone who had their hands shaken in that manner by a complete stranger. The President and Ben enter into a long conversation, which Chance cannot understand, about the economy. When asked by the President for his own opinion, Chance pauses and then talks about that which he knows best.

PRESIDENT : Mr. Gardiner, do you agree with Ben, or do you think we can stimulate growth through temporary incentives ?

Long pause before Chance replies.

CHANCE : As long as the roots are not severed, all is well, and all will be well in the garden.

PRESIDENT : In the garden ?

CHANCE : Yes. In a garden, growth has its season. First comes spring and summer, but then we have fall and winter. And then we get spring and summer again.

PRESIDENT : Spring and summer ?

CHANCE : Yes.

PRESIDENT : And. . . fall and winter ?

CHANCE : Yes.

Short silence, then chime of clock as Ben speaks.

BEN : I think what our insightful young friend is saying is
that we welcome the inevitable seasons of nature,
but we're upset by the seasons of our economy.

CHANCE : Yes. There will be growth in the spring.

PRESIDENT : Um. . . Hum. . . Hum. . . Well, Mr. Gardiner, I
must admit, that is one of the most refreshing
and optimistic statements I've heard in a very,
very, long time. I admire your good solid sense.
It's precisely what we lack on Capitol Hill.

Later the President paraphrases Chance's remarks in a speech about the economy. Immediately Chance is considered to be someone very important. He receives a good deal of press coverage and invitations to appear on TV. Over night Chance has become a very important celebrity. At a United Nations fete he meets several important diplomats and has a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador who receives the impression that Chance not only has a great deal of knowledge of the Soviet Union, but is able to speak Russian, too. Yet, for all the interest that is generated in him, no matter how hard people look into his background, no one is able to learn a thing about him. Chance's past is cloaked in mystery which merely adds to the interest in him.

One person, however, begins to have doubts about who

Chauncey Gardiner really is: Robert Allenby, Ben's doctor. He contacts Thomas, the lawyer who forced Chance out of the Old Man's house, and thus is given a picture of Chance no one else around him has. Not even the powerful information agencies of the U.S. government are able to come up with any information on Chance's background and this further serves to heighten his mystic and aura of power and influence. Robert then returns to tell Ben about Chance. It is late at night and Ben is sitting up in bed going over his portfolio of stocks dictating instructions into a sophisticated dictation machine that shows his words on a monitor and then prints them out on paper when Robert enters.

BEN : No, sell all seven hundred and fifty thousand shares of C.C.T. Ah, let's see. Umm. Sell a million shares of Inland Oil. Oh, and Mrs. Aubrey, have thirty thousand shares of Standard transferred into your account. That's for you.

ROBERT : Ben. . .

BEN : Robert. I was just cleaning up some loose ends. Getting rid of the dead wood so. . . so Eve wouldn't have to cope with it.

ROBERT : Ben, I'd like to talk to you about Chauncey.

BEN : Chauncey ? Ah, you know, Robert, there's something about him that. . . that I trust. He makes me feel good. Since he's been around, the thought of dying has been much easier.

At this bit of news, Robert finds it impossible to tell Ben of his suspicion that Chauncey Gardiner is indeed perhaps nothing more than a simple gardener. Ben has very little time left to live and as his doctor, Robert no doubt wants to keep him as comfortable as possible. While they are talking their words are recorded by the machine. As if to indicate that this matter of discussion is permanently ended and will not likely ever be brought up again, the dictation machine prints out the contents of the monitor and turns itself off. In other words, the final word has been spoken and the matter is closed.

When Ben finally is about to die, he calls for Chance to be with him during his final moments. It is at this point when we see a second transition come over Chance. Unlike the first transition which seemed to have no effect on Chance's personality or behavior, this second transition does cause a noticeable change in Chance: he seems moved emotionally.

BEN : Chauncey.

CHANCE : Yes, Ben. Are you going to die now ?

BEN : I think I'm going to surrender the Horn of Plenty for the Horn of Gabriel. Give me your hand. Let me feel your strength. Chauncey, I hope that you'll stay. Watch over her. She's a delicate flower.

CHANCE : A flower. . . Yes, Ben.

BEN : There's some. . . There's so much left to do. I've spoken to my associates, they're eager to meet you. Tell Eve. . . ah. . .

ROBERT : He's gone, Chauncey.

CHANCE : Yes, I know, Robert. I've seen this happen before.

Chance feels Ben's forehead.

Will you be leaving now, Robert ?

ROBERT : Huh ? Yes, in a day or two. Yes.

CHANCE : Eve is staying. She said she will not close up the house.

ROBERT : You've become quite a close friend of Eve's, haven't you, Chance ?

CHANCE : Yes. Yes. I . . . I love Eve very much, Robert.

ROBERT : And you really are a gardener, aren't you ?

CHANCE : Ah, I am Gardiner. Well, I'll go and tell Eve about Ben.

Chance turns and exits.

ROBERT : I understand. I understand ?

The directness of Chance asking Ben right off if he is going to die now, startles Robert with its bluntness, as we can see by the sudden frowning movement of his eyebrows, and again reminds us, the viewers, of Chance's simple manner. From anyone else, Chance's question, asked in the same manner and in the same situation, would be considered inappropriate and insensitive. Ben, however, is unoffended by Chance's simple straightforward way, even as he is on the verge of death, since this is a quality he has admired in Chance from the start. In fact, he is able to respond with his own feeble attempt at humor in referring to his imminent death as "giving up the Horn of Plenty for the Horn of Gabriel." Taking Chance's hand so that he can feel his strength, Ben requests that he

take care of Eve and mentions that he has spoken with his associates about him. Before he can say more, though, he expires.

Robert puts Ben's hand on his chest and pronounces him dead. Chance's next remark that, "It happens to old people," strikes us again as being rather simple. He leans forward, feels Ben's forehead and we are reminded of when he did exactly the same thing to the Old Man as he lay dead in bed. Thus, though the sudden directness of his question to Robert about leaving now startles him, we are less surprised for we have been conditioned to expect this sort of behavior from Chance. Remembering that Louise left after the Old Man died, we can see the logic in Chance's question as we can that in his subsequent remark that Eve will stay and not close up the house.

Yet, Chance, though his manner of speech remains unchanged, does seem slightly different. It looks as though he is on the verge of tears, as though Ben's death had emotionally moved him. In fact, for the first time we see Chance express an emotion which is his own, and not one that has been imitated, when he says that he loves Eve. During this brief exchange, Robert, who has thus far referred to him as Chauncey, calls him "Chance" and further seeks to verify that he really is a gardener. Perhaps because he is overcome with emotion, Chance's response is such that we cannot actually determine whether he used the indefinite article "a" before "gardener" or not. We therefore are not really sure whether he said, "I am a gardener," or "I am Gardiner." After Chance

goes to tell Eve, we see Robert uttering “I understand” to himself twice, the first time normally and the second time with rising intonation reflecting perplexity.

In the end, during Ben’s funeral, the President makes a speech by reading from Ben’s quotes, Ben’s associates, as they carry Ben’s casket to the grave, discuss replacing the current president with someone else whereupon they all agree on Chance. As the camera shows Ben’s associates flanking his casket in the distance, we hear the President reading Ben’s quote that, “surrounded by little men who forget that we enter naked and exit naked and that no accountant can audit life in our favor.” The remark appears to be more than coincidence, coming as it does at this moment; it could be interpreted as a comment on Ben’s associates as they whisper their desire to maintain control of the Presidency even during the solemnity of Ben’s funeral.

While all this takes place, we see Chance suddenly walk off and away apparently oblivious to what is going on. As he walks he stops and bends down to remove a dead branch from a sapling. Carefully he straightens the sapling, and then satisfied, he stands and walks forward to the lake. He pauses and looks out over the lake to the large mansion sitting on a hill in the distance and then begins to walk out onto the water towards it. Some ways out from the shore, he stops and sticks his umbrella down into the water where it disappears beneath the surface as though he were measuring how deep the water was there. Pulling his umbrella back up, he turns and continues to walk further out onto the water towards the man-

sion as the movie ends. During this last scene we can clearly hear the President reading another of Ben's quotes.

“When I was a boy, I was told the Lord fashioned us from his own image. That's when I decided to manufacture mirrors. Security, tranquility, a well-deserved rest. All the aims I have pursued will soon be realized. Life is a state of mind.”

There is something very enigmatic about the story and this is suggested in the very title itself, *Being There*. Does it refer to being in a certain place or position, or existing in a certain frame of mind? Is the main character, Chance, a person with limited intelligence or is he someone not understood either by those around him in the story or even by us who observe him from outside it? Is this the story of a person rising out of nowhere to a position of national prominence and power because of a series of “chance” encounters or is it in fact a story with a deeper meaning subtly obscured by a character whose actions and manners are deceptively simple?

In the book, Chance appears to be nothing more than an illiterate person, sheltered, or more likely hidden, from the world, who by a series of “chance” coincidences is catapulted into a position of fame, fortune, and power. The coincidences are helped along by the other characters around Chance through their one-sided interpretation of his remarks and actions. From the start to the finish Chance is and remains a simpleton who only feels peace or ease when he is alone in a

garden. If a parallel is to be drawn in the book, it might be that there really is very little difference between a person like Chance and those wealthy and powerful individuals at the top of society who believed him to be someone like themselves. More likely, it could be presumed that the story is a fictionalized account of Kosinski's own personal experiences.

During the Second World War all but two of his family were lost. He fled from village to village in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe surviving as best he could by doing whatever he could. Often working as a farm hand, he learned a great deal about outdoor life and animals. At the age of nine during a confrontation with an angry crowd, he lost his power of speech. Five years later he regained it after a skiing accident. He grew up and was educated in the communist system but always plotted to escape it, which he successfully did by creating fictitious people that provided the documents he needed to officially leave the country. When he was 24 he arrived in America with nothing. After a series of odd jobs he began writing and received recognition for his nonfiction works. It was at this time he met Mary Weir, the widow of a millionaire steel magnate, and two years later they were married.³

Parallels between Kosinski and Chance can easily be drawn: their backgrounds are obscure, each felt most comfortable in natural settings, while Chance was illiterate, Kosinski once lost the power of speech and later as an immigrant had to learn to read and write a new language all over again, and both met wealthy women who elevated their social

positions.

Except for perhaps the last scene in the movie where Chance walks on the surface of the water, a superficial viewing of the movie could elicit much the same impression as the book does. However, taking into consideration the entirety of each scene, especially the background sounds, whether they be TV dialogue, music, or the chiming of a clock during a moment of recognition, and particularly the non-verbal aspects of all the characters, it is possible to perceive a strand of symbolism running throughout the story tying it all together: Chance's resemblance to two major religious personages, Adam and Christ.

The two recognizable music pieces, aside from the gentle lyrical piano passages of Johnny Mandel, are also suggestive. The first, Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony," his eighth symphony consisting of only two movements and a sketch for a third and remarkable for its harmonic boldness, selected to open the movie perhaps suggests that the character we are about to observe is not yet "finished"; that he is "incomplete" at this stage but may become "complete" in the end. After God made Adam, according to the bible, he realized his work was not complete until he made a mate for him, Eve. In this movie, Ben's bestowal of Eve upon Chance marked a noticeable change in him, expression of emotion, thus giving the impression that Chance is more complete now than before.

The second, "Also Sprach Zarathustra," arranged and performed by Eumir Deodato, is named after Friedrich Nietzsche's most celebrated book, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

which introduces the concepts of the death of God, the superman, and the will to power. Coming as it does at that moment when Chance sets out on his own for the very first time in his life, this musical selection, too, could be interpreted as a precursor of events to come: the death of God (Ben's death), the superman (Chance's pre-eminence), and the will to power (indication in the end that Chance has experienced emotion, in the form of compassion, and as such will henceforth exercise his own will to a greater degree). In this sense there is the same existential quality.

The names or positions of the characters also provide us with hints of a religious or philosophical theme. From the start we recognize Chance as being a lover of plants and later a gardener. The word "gardener" has the symbolic meaning of "Adam" — the first man created by God to care for the garden he had created on earth.

In other respects, though, Chance resembles Christ. As Big Bird's song suggests his loneliness, Luke 9:58 suggests Christ's: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." Just as Christ wandered in the wilderness with no food nor water, Chance was cast out of the house which had always been his home and he is forced to walk about hungry and thirsty in an environment that is like a wilderness to him.

Chance is without guile and he evokes a child-like innocence such as that which is visible in the joy he exhibits when he sees children playing in the slum area. Christ says, "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child

shall in no wise enter therein” (Luke, 18:17).

After the Old Man dies Chance is questioned by Thomas the lawyer, the black street gang, and investigated by the world’s most powerful intelligence organizations. All asked the same questions of “Who are you ? ”, “From where do you come ? ”, “What is it that you want ? ” Similar questions were asked of Christ: “Who is this ? ” (Matthew, 21:10), “By what authority doest thou these things and who gave thee this authority ? ” (Ibid., 21:23), “Where is thy Father ? ” (John, 8:19), and “Who art thou ? ” (Ibid., 8:25). Both Christ and Chance are similar to the wind in that no one can tell “whence it cometh, and whither it goeth.” (John, 3:8).

Eve is the name of Adam’s wife and was the first woman. Symbolically the name means “guileless.” In the movie Eve and Chance are brought together essentially by Ben. If Ben were not so ill as to require attendance by his own doctor and nurses at home, Eve probably would have taken Chance to a hospital instead of to her home. Likewise, if Ben had not taken such an interest in him, he would not have told Eve that he had, nor would Eve have expressed her gratitude to Chance for raising Ben’s spirits. Ben, by introducing him to the President, is responsible for Chance’s subsequent celebrity. He also encourages Eve’s affection for Chance and provides an opportunity for it to heighten when he asks Chance to escort Eve to a party for him. In the end, she in effect becomes a gift to Chance from Ben upon the latter’s death.

Ben was god-like in his power in that he commanded the respect of and had influence over the most powerful men in

the land, even the President of the United States. Although Eve discovers Chance and brings him to Ben's attention, it was actually Ben who created Chance in his own image by creating situations which enabled Chance, because of his association with Ben, to be considered wise and powerful like him.

The last scenes of the movie are perhaps the most symbolic of all. Walking away from the funeral services he disassociates himself from the others and their very mundane interests. His stopping to remove an old branch, a piece of dead wood, from a young sapling is symbolic of his own situation. The old wood, which he removed, could represent Ben while the young sapling now free to grow unhampered could represent Chance. Finally, in the very last scene where we see Chance apparently walking on the surface of the water, we are forced to consider whether Chance is indeed Christ-like with the power to walk on water, or whether this can be explained logically, such as by presuming that he is walking on a dock that is only slightly submerged beneath the surface but enough so as to be obscured from our vision.

Being There is a movie from which something new can be learned each time it is viewed no matter how often that might be. While simplicity is a major theme of the film, it is this quality that gives it its depth and richness, as well as a number of possible different interpretations. What we see in the movie and how we interpret it depends entirely on our own individual perceptions. And this is very much like the last words of the film, "Life is a state of mind." This movie, like

life, is what we ourselves make of it.

Notes:

1. Kosinski, Jerzy *Being There* (Bantam Books, 1982), pp. 6-7
2. Ibid., p. 5
3. Ibid., pp. 119-120.