CHAPTER III

DISCUSSION

3.1. Summary of the Story

*Still Alice* is a 2014 American independent drama film written and directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland. The movie is based on Lisa Genova’s bestselling 2007 novel of the same name. The film stars Julianne Moore as Alice Howland, a successful linguistics professor diagnosed with familial Alzheimer’s disease shortly after her 50th birthday. Alec Baldwin plays her husband, John Howland, and Kristen Stewart, Kate Bosworth, and Hunter Parrish play her children, Lydia, Anna, and Tom.

The movie starts with Alice’s 50th birthday at a fancy restaurant. The next day, Alice is waiting to be introduced at University of California, Los Angeles as a guest speaker in a Linguistic class. She suddenly stops during her talk and seems to lose her train of thought. Alice goes back to her house in New York to an empty house and then goes for a jog. She seems out of breath and forgets where she is as the vision starts to blur. She seems upset and tries to compose herself. After a few minutes, she remembers and heads home.

The next day, Alice goes to the doctor and tells him about her memory problems. The doctor tells her to memorize a name and an address, and asks her about her parents to test her memory. She does well, except for remembering the address. The doctor wants to do an MRI scan on her. She goes back to her doctor and he says that her MRI results are good, but the doctor suggests her to take PET scan to get more detailed results because he is concern that she has Alzheimer’s
disease as she failed her memory test. They go back to the neurologist for the test results, and it comes up positive. The neurologist suggests her and her children to take a test to see if her type of Alzheimer’s is familial Alzheimer’s disease or not. On her way to her lecture, Anna calls her to tell her that she has the disease. Tom’s results come up negative, and Lydia does not want to know.

The next day, Alice writes down simple questions, such as what is the name of her oldest daughter. Later, she records herself a video of herself talking to her future self to swallow a bottle of pills to commit suicide if she can no longer answer the basic questions.

Alice tries to answer the questions on her phone and can no longer spell the month October. She wakes up in the middle of the night and goes to the kitchen and is frantically looking for her phone. Alice finally finds her phone in the freezer the next month.

In the final scene, Lydia reads Alice a monologue from a play and as she reads it, Alice flashes back to happy times. Lydia asks Alice if she knew what the monologue was about. Alice cannot speak well anymore and mumbles that it was about love. They hug and we are to presume that Alice continues to deteriorate.

### 3.2. Analysis of the Story

After summarizing the story of *Still Alice* movie, the writer analyzes the cause and effect of Alzheimer’s disease on the main character’s social life, also the moral lesson regarding the main character’s changes which are caused by the disease.
Still Alice is a drama movie directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland based on a novel with the same title written by Lisa Genova. The movie was released on December 5, 2014 in the United States by Sony Pictures Classics. With 101 minutes duration, Still Alice tells a tragic story of the changes in Alice’s life due to Alzheimer’s disease.

3.2.1. The Cause of the Main Character’s Alzheimer’s Disease

This analysis is focused on dialogues from several scenes which reveal the cause of Alice’s Alzheimer’s disease. The writer uses the theories in Chapter II which matches with Alice’s Alzheimer’s disease, which is played by Julianne Moore as Alice Howland.

1. Genetic

Datum 1

![Figure III. 1. Alice and John in the neurologist office.](image]

Doctor Benjamin: “Actually, I was gonna suggest that. In a case like this, with the onset being so early, we would like to check for preselinin mutations that would be an indicator of familial Alzheimer’s disease, which is a rarer form. We can make an appointment for you to see a genetic counselor.”

Alice: “So this concerns my children?”
Doctor Benjamin: “Yes.”

(At the neurologist, 25:59 – 26:09)

In this scene, the doctor suggests John and Alice to tell their children to take the test because she is afraid that Alice’s Alzheimer’s disease is the familial type.

In the sentence “With the onset being so early, we would like to check for preselinin mutations that would be an indicator of familial Alzheimer’s disease,” it indicates that Alice’s disease might be genetically inherited from her parents. People with Alzheimer’s disease gene inherited by their parents have more risk in developing Alzheimer’s disease earlier than the most common type of Alzheimer’s disease, which usually begins after age sixty five while early-onset Alzheimer’s disease appears between ages of thirty and sixty years.

Alice’s PET scan results show that there are some areas in Alice’s brain that have beta-amyloid build-up that has been ongoing for several years. Alice is still young to have Alzheimer’s disease, so her Alzheimer’s falls on the early-onset categories.

Alice’s Alzheimer’s is caused by mutation of amyloid precursor protein (APP) and preselinin genes which cause the production of high amount of a toxic protein fragment called beta-amyloid peptide. This toxic protein can build up in the brain starting from the age thirty and form clumps in the brain called amyloid plaques. A buildup of beta-amyloid peptide and amyloid plaques may lead to the death of nerve cells and progressive signs and symptoms of this disease.
3.2.2. The Effect of Alzheimer’s Disease on the Main Character’s Life

Alzheimer’s disease can really affect the patient’s life. The effects of Alzheimer’s disease are dementia, changes in patient’s mental state, changes in personality and behavior, and patient’s personal life. In Still Alice movie, the effects of Alzheimer’s disease on Alice’s life can be seen on the following scenes.

1. Dementia

Dementia is the process of losing cognitive functions. These functions include memory, language skills, visual perception, problem solving, self-management, and the ability to focus and pay attention.

Datum 1

Alice: “I couldn’t find the bathroom.”
John: “It is okay, baby. Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.”
Alice: (Sobbing) “I don’t know where I am.”

(At the beach house, 47:08 – 47:17)
Alice and John are about to go running, but Alice has to go to the bathroom first. She gets lost in her beach house looking for the bathroom and wets her pants. As John comes looking for her, she cries.

There are many scenes where Alice forgets things, but the writer thinks that this scene is the start where Alice and her family struggle with her Alzheimer’s.

In the sentence “I couldn’t find the bathroom,” and “I don’t know where I am,” from the scene above, it shows one of dementia effects in Alice’s memory as she cannot find the bathroom and forgets where she is. The first sign of dementia is usually loss of short-term memory, and it happens to Alice as she suddenly forgets where she is.

Datum 2

Figure III. 3. Alice makes a cup of tea in the kitchen herself.

Lydia : “Where’s Elena?”
Alice : “I’m making myself a cup of tea.”
Lydia : “Cool. Where’s your caretaker?”
Alice : “Elena’s not here today. Her daughter’s sick. She’s at the doctor.”
Lydia : “So you’re alone?”
Alice : “I can make myself a cup of tea.”

(In the kitchen, 1:21:51 – 1:22:15)
In this scene, Alice is in the kitchen and is video chatting with her daughter, Lydia, who lives in Los Angeles, California. They are talking about how Bill Thompson is going to help Lydia to better her career in acting.

The sentence “Where’s your caretaker?” indicates that Alice starts to struggle in doing daily activities that she needs a caretaker. As someone going through dementia, Alice might have lost judgment, and it can be very dangerous for her to live alone without supervision as she has already forgotten to do some self-managements.

Datum 3

Figure III. 4. Alice struggles to talk.

Lydia : “Did you like that?”
Alice   : (Nods)
Lydia : “What I just read, did you like it?”
Alice   : (Mumbles) “Yeah.”
Lydia : “And what was it about?”
Alice   : (Struggling to talk) “Love. Yeah, love.”
Lydia : “Yeah, Mom. It was about love.”

(At Alice’s house in New York, 1:33:53 – 1:34:31)

This is the last scene in the movie before it shows Alice’s childhood memory. Lydia reads Alice one of her plays. Afterward, Lydia asks
Alice about her opinion what the play was about. Alice struggles to speak as she does not seem to remember what it was about.

The datum above shows that Alice’s communication skills have deteriorated. It is one of the effects of dementia as this disease really affects the brain. In the process of dementia, the disease makes the patient progressively losing their cognitive skills and communication is one of them. It is shown in the picture and dialogues above that Alice struggles to remember and understand what Lydia asked to her.

2. Changes in Patient’s Mental State

In the early stages of the illness, people with Alzheimer’s disease are prone to mental illnesses. In the movie, Alice says that she has accumulated memories all her life, and they have become her precious possessions. Alice knows that she will lose her memories progressively and she becomes depressed.

Datum 1

Alice: “I wish I had cancer.”
John: “Don’t say that.”
Alice: “No, I do. I mean it. I mean, I wouldn’t feel so ashamed. People have cancer, they wear pink ribbons for you and go...”
on long walks, and raise money. And you don’t have to feel like some kind of social... I can’t remember the word.”

(At home, 36:29 – 36:53)

Alice goes for a jog and goes to Pinkberry. When she gets home, John is worried and upset waiting for her. They get into an argument because Alice forgot that they had a dinner plan with John’ colleague from work.

Datum 2

Figure III. 6. Alice writes a note for when she cannot answer the basic questions.

Alice : “Hi, Alice. I am you and I have something very important to say to you. So, I guess you’ve reached that point; the point where you can’t no longer answer any of the questions. So, this is the next logical step. I’m sure of it. in your bedroom there’s a dresser with a blue lamp. Open the top drawer. In the back of the drawer, there’s a bottle with pills in it. It says, “Take all pills with water.” Now there are a lot of pills in that bottle, but it’s very important that you swallow them all. Okay? And then lie down and get to sleep. And don’t tell anyone what you’re doing.”

(In her bedroom, 39:08 – 40:03)

In this scene, after visiting a nursing center for elderly with Alzheimer’s disease, Alice writes down simple questions on her phone for her to answer every day. The questions ask about where she lives,
what the name of her oldest daughter is, and what month is her birthday. After writing down the questions, she records herself talking for her future self, telling herself to commit suicide if she cannot answer the question on her phone anymore.

From the scenes above, it can be concluded that dementia has affected Alice’s mental state. She compares her disease to people with cancer by saying that having cancer is better than having Alzheimer’s, because she knows as time flies, she will not be able to do basic daily activities and that she will become a burden to her family because of her Alzheimer’s disease. Because of the same reason, she also records a video telling her forgetful future self to commit suicide.

3. Changes in Personality and Behavior

Datum 1

Figure III. 7. Alice gets irritated because John does not give her the attention she needed.

Alice : “You work all the time.”

(At the beach house, 51:06 – 52:15)

Alice talks to John about how bored she is and she has nothing to do. She wants John to spend more time with her, but John says that he
is working. John tells Alice to read something from Lydia’s plays while still doing his work on the computer. Alice feels irritated and goes downstairs to Lydia’s room to find something to read.

**Datum 2**

![Image: Alice reads her speech to Lydia.](image)

Lydia: “Just print out one more.”
Alice: “Do you know that it took me three days to write this?”
Lydia: “You can print out one more.”
Alice: “No, it took me three days.”
Lydia: “Sorry.”
Alice: “Three days.”

(In her office at her house, 1:03:19 – 1:05:03)

In this scene, Alice is video chatting with her daughter, Lydia, and reading her speech for the Alzheimer’s Association Care Conference. As she finished reading it, Lydia asks her to put her experiences and how she deals with Alzheimer’s in the speech to make it personal, because she mostly writes about the scientific research of Alzheimer’s disease. Alice says that Lydia was not listening because she wrote it in her speech. Lydia asks her to read her speech again, but Alice gets irritated because she has highlighted her speech with yellow highlighter and she cannot read it again because of that. Lydia asks her to print her
speech again, and Alice gets even more annoyed then tells Lydia that it took her three days to write her speech and clicks off the Skype.

From the scenes and dialogues above, it tells that Alzheimer’s disease has changed Alice’s personality, which was used to be calm and after the disease she is easily irritated by simple things. Alice experiences irritability and moodiness as the effects of Alzheimer’s disease she has.

4. Patient’s Personal Life

Datum 1

Figure III. 9. Alice and John talk about the past and what they are going to do in the future.

Alice : “I kind of like it, being liberated from Columbia.”

(In the bedroom at the beach house, 42:51 – 43:53)

Alice is talking to John about happy, old times they spent together, and how she was relentless for wanting to have a child and a job at the same time. While they are talking about what they are going to do in the future, Alice says that it might be the last year she is still herself.

From the sentence “Liberated from Columbia,” it indicates that Alice is let go of her profession as a teacher at Columbia University. As
in the movie before, Alice’s ability in teaching was complained by her students, but she said she still could teach since it was still in the early stages. Alice said earlier that she likes working because she thrives from it. For Alice, stop being a teacher or stop working is nothing she has ever imagined, but she has to let go of all that because of her Alzheimer’s disease.

**Datum 2**

![Figure III. 10. Alice and John have an argument.](image)

Alice : “You don’t… **you don’t want that. A year at home with me, watching this.**”  
John : “I didn’t say that.”  
Alice : “You didn’t have to.”

(In the bedroom, 1:13:09 – 1:13:27)

John talks to Alice about the possibility of them moving to Minnesota because John got a better job to financially support them. Alice says she cannot move out of the city because everything she knows is there.

From the scenes above, it proves that Alzheimer’s disease will slowly limit the patient’s ability in doing their job as it can be seen in Alice’s life. She was let go of Columbia University because of her ability in teaching has deteriorated. Alzheimer’s disease does not only
affect the patient, it also affects the people around the patient. In the scene above, it affects John, as her husband, emotionally. He cannot stand seeing Alice, someone she loves, change from someone he once knew to a stranger because of the Alzheimer’s disease.

3.2.3. Moral Lesson

People with Alzheimer’s disease gradually lose their sense of time and place. A major symptom is that they forget things that they have just said or done, although their memory for past events may remain clear for a time. As the disease progresses, people become more unaware of their condition although they may still experience distress.

After analyzing the main character’s Alzheimer’s disease in *Still Alice* movie, the writer figures out some moral lessons implied through the story that can be taken as a lesson for its audience.

First is that Alzheimer’s disease is generally known to happen to elderly can also happen to young adult. Early-onset Alzheimer’s disease can happen to people between ages of thirty and sixty. *Still Alice* movie shows us that Alzheimer’s disease could happen to anyone below the age of sixty five, where it is usually the age when people develop this disease. Even though Alzheimer’s disease mostly happens to people in old age, it is not a normal stage of growing old.

It is widely assumed that keeping our minds sharp and education are good ways to delay or prevent the onset of Alzheimer’s disease. Although this disease is unavoidable if you have the gene, that does not mean you should
not try your best to delay it. A combination of prevention and preparation may be effective to delay Alzheimer’s disease.

The second is that early-onset Alzheimer’s disease can be said as an even longer goodbye. This saying really resonates with Alice’s family as they have to watch her progressively losing herself. Especially in Alice’s case with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease, her family spends more time saying “goodbye” to the Alice they are slowly losing.

There is really no cure for Alzheimer’s disease. There are medication and management strategies that could temporarily improve the symptoms. It is tragic and inconvenient that Alzheimer’s disease also does not wait for a right time. In reality, it sucks away time. It is better for you to educate yourself on early onset, get yourself tested if you suspect any signs, and make the most of the time you have while you are still you.

The third is that people who suffer from Alzheimer’s disease need a lot of support. As in the movie, Lydia who used to live in California, Los Angeles moved back to New York to give Alice the support that she needed while John moved to Minnesota to work. *Still Alice* movie is delivered from the perspective of someone with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease, and it did a great job in showing that people with Alzheimer’s disease really need support from the people around them. The movie even showed that Alice with her Alzheimer’s can be irritating and annoying, but the people around her, especially Lydia, patiently tried to understand and support Alice even more.

As people who are diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease might feel shocked, sad, and angry, the people around them should support them
emotionally. Although it can be hard to take care of them, it is the care-giving of the people around them that can make the biggest difference to patients with Alzheimer’s disease.