

“Everything Stays”: The Eternal Return and *Amor Fati* in the *Adventure Time* Miniseries *Stakes*

By Paul Thomas

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The final few moments of the episode “The Dark Cloud”—the epic ending to the *Stakes* miniseries—feature Marceline the Vampire Queen emotionally singing a lullaby her mother taught her centuries ago called “Everything Stays.” The lyrics to this song detail how things often change even when they outwardly appear to stay the same:

*Everything stays,
Right where you left it
Everything stays,
But it still changes
Ever so slightly...
Daily and nightly...
In little ways,
When everything stays*

As Marceline sings these lyrics, we are treated to a montage of people across Ooo, reminding us that things have “reset” to the season six status quo: Marceline is a vampire again. The King of Ooo is dethroned. The vampires are gone. Bubblegum has reclaimed her crown. Some fans were critical of this turn of events, arguing that it was just another example of *Adventure Time* shaking up the series’ norm, only to revert to normalcy episodes later. This interpretation, to put it bluntly, is imperceptive, as it fails to register the philosophical point the episode is considering: the Eternal Return and *amor fati*.

The Stoic Bonds of Vampirism

To fully understand this, let us first consider the third episode of *Stakes*, “Vamps About,” specifically the short but impactful flashback showing how Marceline was turned into a vampire. As she and the Vampire King prepare to square off, the latter notes that Marceline has yet to “pay a price” for the powers she is accumulating. Indeed, Marceline has staked the King’s entire court, absorbing their powers one by one, yet she has somehow escaped becoming a vampire herself. In the *Adventure Time* universe, vampirism is presented as a fundamental blight on the fabric of reality that due to its nature as an eternal curse simply *has* to exist. Marceline, however,

is threatening to “wipe out” that curse by killing its carriers, which could seriously disrupt the careful ordering of the universe itself. This threatened equilibrium is finally restored when Marceline engages the King in direct combat, for while she manages to kill him, he manages to bite her. As she screams out in a combination of pain and horror, her eyes glow red, a visual sign that her fate has been sealed and that the eternal curse of vampirism has been transmitted to her. As can be imagined, this event has a major impact on Marceline’s mental and emotional development. She is effectively frozen at one point in history, unable to grow and, by extension, unable to let go of her past.

One thousand years later, while fighting the resurrected Vampire King in the penultimate episode of *Stakes* entitled “Checkmate,” Marceline bemoans the fact that everything in this world repeats over and over again, and that as an immortal vampire, she was doomed to watch the world fail to learn from its mistakes. The Vampire King makes note of this observation and points out that if Marceline stakes him once again, she too will be caught in this loop, merely replaying that which happened in the past. The Vampire King is thus appealing to her desire to escape the shackles of Fate. It was this same desire that had led Marceline to scientifically shed her vampirism at the start of *Stakes*, as she viewed the curse as an immortal prison that prevents change and forces her to watch events repeat ad nauseam. Being mortal again, she believed, would free her from her Fate, allowing her to finally live her own life.

The difference between the perceived fatalism of immortality and the freedom of mortality recalls the philosophical divide between the Stoics and the Epicureans. Epicureanism is a school of thought formulated by the Greek philosopher Epicurus and popularized by great thinkers like the Latin poet Lucretius. Adherents of this philosophy believe that the purpose of life is to maximize pleasure and limit pain. Epicureanism also holds that all things—including what we call our souls—are composed of tiny atoms falling without purpose in an infinite void. The implication of this materialist paradigm is that there is no such thing as “Fate” or “Destiny”; instead, Chance rules and humans are free to live their lives in any way that they see fit.

Conversely, Stoicism (a philosophical system whose adherents included the famed Greek philosopher Xeno of Kition and the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius) holds the exact opposite worldview: “Fate” reigns over reality and that the universe is constantly in a state of cyclical formation, destruction, and recreation—a “web of actions and reactions”—called *palingenesis*, which is an ancient Greek term that literally means “rebirth.”¹ What exactly does Fate reigning over reality entail? The Stoic philosopher Epictetus opened his famed work the *Enchiridion*² with the statement: “There are things that are within our power and things that are not.”³ In other words, “Fate” can be considered all aspects of existence that are not under our control. The Stoics thus argued that humans should love this fate (often rendered in the Latin *amor fati*) for the simple reason that “if you regard ... that which is not [under] your own [control]”—i.e. that which is fated to be—“you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will blame the gods and other men.”⁴ Put simply, you *will* be miserable—no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

At the onset of *Stakes*, Marceline seemingly finds herself embedded in a thoroughly Stoic world: her turning has forced her into a nightmare version of *palingenesis*, dooming her to watch the events of world history repeat over and over again. As a result, she views herself as but a

¹ A *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “παλιγγενεσία” [*palingenesia*], by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott; Frank Tipler, *Physics of Immortality*, 75.

² After which the book in *Adventure Time* was likely named.

³ Epictetus apud Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 45.

⁴ Epictetus apud Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 45.

peon to the ever-rotating Wheel of Fate. With no sense of agency and yearning for a chance to emotionally grow, Marceline repudiates her vampiric destiny, asking Bubblegum to remove the curse from her body so she can embrace what could be called a mortal, Epicurean lifestyle.⁵ This desire eventually leads to her parlaying with the Vampire King and agreeing to remove the cursed vampiric effluvium from him, too. However, after this Essence is removed, it eventually explodes and unleashes unto Ooo the Dark Cloud, a personification of the curse itself. And now Marceline is tasked with fighting it *again*. It is in that moment that she realizes that there is no escape. The vampiric curse *must* exist. Marceline's Epicurean hopes are dashed, and Fate rules. What is an emo half-demon to do?

Nietzsche to the Rescue

To answer the present question, let us take another quick philosophical tangent. Over a century ago, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche postulated a famous thought experiment concerning the idea of "eternal recurrence." In this experiment, first published in his book *The Gay Science* (1882), he asked:

What if a demon crept after you one day or night in your loneliest solitude and said to you: "This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live again and again, times without number"; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy ... and everything in the same series and sequence ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who thus spoke? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment in which you would have answered him: "You are a god and never did I hear anything more divine!" ... The question in all and everything: "Do you want this again and again, times without number?"⁶

Put another way, the question is as follows: What if you were fated to keep living your life over and over again in the exact same way that you are doing now? Would you be exhilarated by this revelation and embrace it like the Stoics, or would you be horrified that existence is "useless, senseless, and absurd" because neither true freedom nor the concept of progress as we conventionally know it would exist?⁷

Nowadays, most people view the eternal recurrence as a philosophical exercise,⁸ but for Marceline, it turns out to be very real, given that history is once again repeating itself before her eyes. She is horrified; despondent and depressed, she declines to help Bubblegum, Finn, and Jake out, noting that there is no point in fighting if life is a broken record, repeating endlessly. Marceline thus lapses into nihilism, seeing "existence [a]s useless, senseless, and absurd."⁹ This sort of pessimism is emphasized by the visual of the Dark Cloud marching over Marceline and dumping rain on her head, thereby making it a literal storm cloud "raining on her parade."

It is at that moment that Ice King arrives on the scene and instills motivation, albeit accidentally: he applauds Marceline for staying out of the fray, equating her to "cockroaches or rats"—critters that are good at surviving disaster, but which most people find revolting. It is at

⁵ This is illustrated at both the beginning and end of "Checkmate," when Marceline is shown feasting—an act often associated with Epicureanism.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Eternal Recurrence," 249-50.

⁷ Tipler, *Physics of Immortality*, 79.

⁸ Mark McGinn, "Nietzsche's 'Most Abysmal Thought,'" 71.

⁹ Tipler, *Physics of Immortality*, 79.

this moment Marceline realizes that by bench-sitting, she is being but a weak slave to external causes—a “destitute modern [wo]man who has surrendered [her]self to ... a denial of [her] true existence.”¹⁰ In her heart, Marceline knows this is wrong: she is a fighter, not a quitter. Marceline thus experiences that “tremendous moment” about which Nietzsche wrote. Quickly she takes to the skies. Streaking towards the Dark Cloud as it lumbers toward the Candy Kingdom, Marceline is determined to finish this battle once again. By doing this, she knows that she *will* return to being the Vampire Queen. *This* is why Marceline’s actions are so powerful: By directly attacking the Dark Cloud, Marceline demonstrates that she does not fear the eternal return. Instead, of passively accepting her fate in a state of despair, she has chosen to actively love and embrace her destiny (*amor fati*). And because she is accepting the entirety of her fate, she is by extension accepting and finally making peace with her past—that same past that had caused her so many centuries of distress and prevented her from growing as a person.

In a breathtaking scene combining the anime aesthetic of *Sailor Moon* with the demonic horror of H. P. Lovecraft, Marceline plunges deep into the core of the gargantuan Dark Cloud. She then literally “opens up her heart” (thereby subverting the “power of love” trope¹¹ while also visually alluding to *amor fati*), revealing a voracious, demonic maw that vacuums up the Cloud from the inside out. As the last vestige of the Dark Cloud is pulled toward its doom, the vampiric specter bites its fangs into Marceline’s neck, holding on for dear life before it is totally consumed. Marceline’s bite marks return, and as she falls to the ground, the sun begins to burn her skin, indicating that she has indeed become the Vampire Queen once more.

Everything Stays... But It Still Changes

So, despite her best efforts, Marceline cannot escape the curse that is fated to permeate every fiber of her undead body. For this reason, it is easy to read *Stakes* as a tragedy through and through. But, if we read the work as Nietzsche or a Stoic might, we will see that the miniseries actually ends on a triumphant note: While Marceline’s outcome maybe less than ideal, it was unequivocally embraced and loved by Marceline herself. In the episode’s epilogue, after the vampires have been slain and the world has returned to normal, this is made most manifest when Marceline nonchalantly muses to her friends, “I’m cool being a vampire again.” These words colloquially recall Nietzsche’s “formula for greatness in a human being”: “That one wants nothing [to be different], not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens [out] of necessity ... but to love it.”¹²

Having thus made peace with her past and with her vampiric nature, Marceline describes herself as having “grown up,” but it might be better to call her Ooo’s “Übermensch.”¹³ As Alexander Nehamas writes, “The only way to justify one’s life is to ... *accept it in its entirety*; and the mark of this ability is the desire to *repeat this very life* ... again in all eternity. Suppose then, that one comes to accept [the Eternal Return], that one begins to try to make oneself such as one would want to be again, and thus act as the Übermensch acts” [emphasis added].¹⁴

But does this not mean that *Adventure Time* is espousing a fatalistic philosophy that precludes free will and thus individual freedom over all aspects of life? It is a little more

¹⁰ Sascha Saintevic, *Short No Fear Nietzsche*. Part 2.

¹¹ See: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ThePowerOfLove>.

¹² Nietzsche, “Eternal Recurrence,” 260.

¹³ There’s also some nice irony in the fact that *Adventure Time*’s “Übermensch” (a German word for “a superior human being,” but often translated into English as the gendered “superman”) is a female demon who can literally fly.

¹⁴ Alexander Nehamas, “The Eternal Recurrence,” 347.

complicated than that. Robert C. Solomon bluntly writes, “We cannot act as *causa sui*, ‘bootstrapping’ our way into selfhood.”¹⁵ Why is this? Because “self-making ... is by no means independent or separable from one’s native ‘talents,’ one’s instincts, one’s environments, the influence of other people and one’s culture. It is not a matter of ‘making one-self’ on a basis of absolute ontological freedom ... but of ‘becoming who you are.’”¹⁶ In other words, we as humans (or half-demons) are always bound by certain things: our finite knowledge, our socio-cultural biases, our upbringing, the limits of our physical body, etc. Thus, a total Epicurean understanding of “free will” is impossible because there will always be something preventing us from being unrestricted in the full sense of the word. For Marceline, that hindrance is the vampiric curse that due to past events she must bear.

At the same time, this does not release us from all decision-making.¹⁷ Remember earlier, I argued that “fate” is more or less a spooky term meaning that “some things are under our control, while others are not under our control.”¹⁸ Given this, Epictetus argues, “It is your business then to take what fate brings and deal with what happens, as is fitting.”¹⁹ Put most simply, while Fate may preclude us from having a radical and libertarian “free will,” it does not negate our internal volition. For Marceline, this means that while she might be powerless to stop the eternal recurrence of her becoming a vampire, she still has control over certain things—most importantly, her reaction to that event. In the end, by abandoning despondency and choosing instead to affirm the entirety of her fate—past, present, and future—she is thereby rising above vulgar nihilism and proudly upholding the totality of her very existence.

Stakes is thus the perfect example of the paradoxical idea that inner change can happen even when external things appear set in stone—which is the very theme of Marceline’s song “Everything Stays.” As Olivia Olson herself put it: “[At the end of *Stakes*, Marceline’s] trapped in this [immortal] body that stays the same—she’s never going to change physically ... But on the inside, ... she’s grown and definitely matured.”²⁰ This unique sort of growth recalls the decidedly stoic idea of *prokopê*: internal progress on the path to becoming an enlightened, rational, and virtuous being.²¹ And this sort of transformation in the face of permanence extends to the viewer, too. Each time we watch *Stakes*, we will be seeing the same two-dimensional images flash on the screen in the exact same order as last time, forming the same composite whole. It can be said that the miniseries is “fated” to happen in a certain way by it being an animated television program, but often, a repeat viewing will trigger some new thought or idea deep within our mind, enabling us to view the miniseries in a new light. While Alexander Nehamas might argue that “what is thus [different] is not the past” (or, in this case, the video) “but its significance,”²² Marceline would probably say that things will have nevertheless changed in some way... ever so slightly.

¹⁵ Robert C. Solomon, “Nietzsche on Fatalism,” 64.

¹⁶ Solomon, “Nietzsche on Fatalism,” 68.

¹⁷ Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*.

¹⁸ Epictetus, *Discourses, Books 3-4; Fragments; the Encheiridion*, 218, 483.

¹⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses: Books 1 and 2*.

²⁰ John Moe et al., “Vampires, De-Vampirizing, and Olivia Olson.”

²¹ Keith Seddon, *Epictetus’ Handbook*, 67-69, 228-229.

²² Nehamas, “The Eternal Recurrence,” 349.

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