

Beau Is Afraid Ending Explained: What The Surreal Movie Means

Ari Aster and A24's *Beau Is Afraid* is one of the most confounding films of the year. But we think we can explain it...

[David Crow](#) April 21, 2023



Photo: A24

*This article contains significant **Beau Is Afraid** spoilers.*

He stands alone in front of a judging audience. One might even say he's been alone his whole life, if not for the persistent specter of his mother. Mona Wasserman brought Beau into this world to fill a singular need, but this middle-aged, miserable, and perpetually bewildered man has never once

fulfilled any of his own needs. Now the end has come, and Beau is afraid.

The final sequence of the film almost plays like a delirium, a Freudian reckoning between a man and a world that have never been able to reconcile their differences. That world includes all the figures from Beau's life who, like Mona (Patti LuPone), stand in judgment of [Joaquin Phoenix](#)'s pitiful protagonist. But it's also applicable to the audience who is at last asked to make an accounting of Beau's hopes, failures, and waylaid dreams. And in the closing moments of writer-director [Ari Aster](#)'s epically mystifying third feature film, the movie seems to at last demand we find Beau as wanting as the cold and unmoved audience on the screen, which includes Beau's doctor (Richard Kind), his menacing neighbors from New York, and even Mona who is in attendance. That's particularly impressive since only moments earlier she was seemingly slaughtered by Beau.

They all condemn Beau's weakness as he struggles to find the words that would make sense of his life. And he is then punished by returning to the watery darkness he might have always craved as the motorboat he occupies capsizes. After going under, Beau is never seen again.

It's a profoundly stark, aloof finale that asks you to sit with Beau's suffering and apparent fate. During a Q&A Aster did with Emma Stone at a screening I attended, the filmmaker even hinted that he wanted the ending to feel "like going through the guts of a man and coming out his ass." We're supposed to stew in the juices and, uh, afterbirth that comes with that journey reaching its inevitable end.

Yet in that hot mess on the ground, likely more than a few questions gnaw at viewers: What was real from what we just saw? What was fantasy? And what the hell did any of it mean? By design, [Beau Is Afraid](#) is wide open to interpretation, however we think we have some strong ideas about what

Aster is going for.

Reality Never Mattered to Beau

A case can be made that the only scene we can trust entirely happened the way it's depicted onscreen is the very opening of the film, in which Aster slowly reveals a warm, watery blackness is not a blank frame but a point-of-view shot inside the womb. It is from there that baby Beau emerges, calm, collected, perhaps even happy. His mother (played in her youth by Zoe-Lister Jones) fusses over the baby, worriedly needling the doctor about if it's a bad sign he doesn't cry. Yet Beau remains stoic, unable to cry because he has nothing to fear. Yet. His mind and body are unblemished. The doctor then smacks him on the ass, and Beau at last cries for the first time to his mother's relief. She would make sure that he never stopped.

This sequence is a quizzical way to start the story, especially since even a neurotic like the schlubby middle-aged Beau we spend the rest of the movie with could never dream that he remembers his own birth. In that way, we probably can take the event as something close to the reality of how Aster's wayward protagonist entered the world. Conversely, the rest of the 179 minutes we spend with Beau are incredibly unreliable, particularly for those looking for definitive answers about what "is real" and what actually happened to Beau.

That's because the reality of Beau's life does not matter an iota to Beau or his movie. Does he really live in a New York City neighborhood so hellbound that neighbors are murdered in the street and their bodies are left to rot, even days later? When he leaves his apartment unlocked, did every vagrant, junkie, and hobo in the greater five-borough area really cram into the little studio for an all-night orgy while the chump was locked out?

Probably not, but for the intents and purposes of the movie, it definitely happened. Beau is the definition of an unreliable narrator, a protagonist whose perception of the world around him is limited and often skewed. This device is used typically to disorient an audience from the contours of the narrative, but in the case of ***Beau Is Afraid***, Beau's unreliability is the narrative. He suffers from likely multiple anxiety disorders and is unable to ever escape from his neuroses. We never get a sense of perspective on the world outside of Beau, because he likewise cannot. Instead we're asked to treat the metaphor as fact in what seems to be a highly allegorical construct.

Beau Is Afraid attempts to thrust viewers into what crippling anxiety, panic, and fear of the outside world is like—to the point where crossing the street to buy a bottle of water carries with it the stakes and tension of entering a demilitarized war zone. To Beau, the whole world is *that* bad, so the film demands we accept all of its fantastical elements at face value, because Beau and the film lack the tools to achieve self-awareness. The rest of the story, thus, becomes a parable about asking why Beau turned out to be such a doomed figure.

Suburban Lotus Eaters and an Old Flame on the Clock

The second act of the film might be my personal favorite. After being pancaked by the SUV of a suburban mother named Grace (Amy Ryan), Beau awakens three days later to discover that he is under a doctor's care... and Grace's husband, Doc Roger (Nathan Lane). By this point in the film, Beau has been led to believe that his mother, whom he failed to visit earlier in the week, has apparently died in a freak falling chandelier accident. He is desperate to go home, but Roger and Grace just will not allow it.

The more determined Beau becomes about returning home to at least attend

his mother's memorial and funeral, the more reasons Roger and Grace find to rebuff him—he needs to rest if his stitches are to heal (and when they burst, well, let's not bother with replacing them); Roger then needs to see about a patient who's had an emergency; and finally they just want to have a barbecue that will let Beau play the role of surrogate big brother to their teenage daughter (Kylie Rogers).

Slowly, but surely, Beau's quest to get home to mama takes on the bent of an epic in the classical sense—a fact underscored later in the script when Beau mythologizes himself as a tragic hero during an extended animated fantasy sequence where he imagines his journey as only the beginning of many Herculean labors. In this way, comparisons to Homer's *The Odyssey* are inescapable, right down to the uncomfortable parallels between Beau's determination to see his mother, even in death, resembling Odysseus' need to return to his wife.

Roger and Grace's stalling tactics, which refuse to allow Beau to leave their slice of suburban paradise, likewise resembles the Lotus Eaters in *The Odyssey*, a diverse collection of inhabitants on an island whose primary source of food is a lotus fruit that makes them happily apathetic to the outside world. Roger and Grace seem to be attempting to lull Beau into complacency through the virtue of their calm, suburban, upper middle class lifestyle. And to be fair, compared to the nightmare of Beau's NYC existence in the first act, it is a reprieve.

It is also a lie in multiple ways. First, there is the fact that Roger is supplying his family with drugs (a 21st century lotus plant) in an attempt to dull Grace's sense of grief over her actual dead adult son, who was killed while serving in a Mideast war. Roger also uses pills as a way to control and neglect his teenage daughter who, like Beau, seems partially condemned by the sins of her parents' care to a dark end (more on that in the next section).

More importantly though, we eventually learn that Roger and Grace were hired by Beau's definitely not-dead mother to gently compel him to stay in this house with a dotting maternal figure in Grace... and see if he would take the bait of that supposed ideal.

"Roger seems to a certain degree to be playing a role," Nathan Lane told me when [we chatted about *Beau Is Afraid*](#). "I think every once in a while he says something and you think, 'That's probably closer to who he really is.' He seems very upbeat. A little too upbeat for my tastes. He's got kind of corny dad humor, and he thinks he's hip by saying, 'My dude! My brother!' But I think it's maybe a bit of an act, although Ari thinks that's genuine."

Intriguingly, I was unconvinced if we could rely on Beau's eyes when he discovers in the third act that Roger works for Mona, but according to Lane, that was always Aster's intention.

Said Lane, "He's taken on a task and he's doing his best to make it happen, to fulfill what he's been asked to do. And it seems like they're there to help Beau, but maybe they're not. Maybe it's just a test." Lane even speculated if Roger was a real doctor, and when Aster insisted he was, the actor came up with a backstory involving multiple malpractice lawsuits ("Did you see the stitches he did on Beau's stomach wound? That's not good!") to explain why he would fall under Mona's influence. Either way, like almost everyone else Beau winds up meeting on his journeys, Roger and Grace are secretly working under the auspices of Mona Wasserman.

That may even include the closest thing Beau ever had to a girlfriend, Elaine. During extended flashbacks of a cruise Beau went on, we learn Elaine was the first (and only?) girl that Beau ever kissed when they were about 14. After that chaste kiss though, young Elaine (Julia Antonelli) is taken away from young Beau (Armen Nahapetian), although not before demanding he wait for

her. Combined with the insidious lie his mother tells him about how his father died of a heart attack while impregnating her (which is supposedly how his paternal grandfather also died), Beau accepts that he can never have sex, lest he too wants his first climax to be his last.

This is all thrown out the window when on the day of Mona's funeral in the third act, Beau meets adult Elaine (Parker Posey) and perhaps out of pity, boredom, or horniness, she agrees to have sex with Beau. She's definitely down to party with the Mariah Carey song queued up on her iPhone... and yet there might be some sympathy in her eyes, too, because as she alludes to Beau's horror, she is now working for Mona.

After having sex—and Beau achieving, long, long overdue relief from ejaculating for the first time in his life—Beau finally develops enough clarity and confidence to confront his mother when she (surprise!) reveals she faked her death. And the first thing he is furious about? Did Mona hire Elaine, the girl she knew her son carried a torch for over the span of three or four decades? Her deflection suggests she definitely hired Elaine, although it becomes a question as to when.

Was Elaine always working for Mona when as a teenager she won the puppy love and devotion of young Beau? I'd say yes, as it was a crucial part of the mind game where Mona implanted a fear of sex—or finding another woman besides his mother—into Beau. But even if Elaine was not sought out until adulthood, this still speaks to the cold horror of Beau's life: Everyone who's ever mattered to him has been either his mother or "the help."

As a child, we see that reflected in how Beau only interacts with waiters, servers, and employees beholden to his mother's whims. And later in life, we discover that his therapist (Stephen McKinley Henderson), his shoddy doctor and faux-adoptive father in Roger, and his gentler replacement

mother via Grace, were also paid to manipulate Beau's extreme bouts of guilt. So why not also the only girl Beau has sadly obsessed over? More sinister still, perhaps young Elaine did take a liking to Beau, so his mother bought her and her family's services to devastate Beau with a little late night theater.

Everyone in Beau's life who took even a passing interest in this sad sack did so out of a fiduciary obligation and a mother's machinations. Which brings us to the real heart of the movie.

A Spineless Oedipus and the Terror of the One-Eyed Monster

Aster has been circumspect about what the movie exactly means to him, but he has admitted it is a tale about guilt. Lane puts a finer point on it when he told us that it's "an epic tale of guilt and codependency." And it is definitely about the guilt a mother can elicit from the dutiful son. For this reason, ***Beau Is Afraid*** has [been accurately described](#) in reviews as being an enormous metaphor for the distinct dynamics between Jewish sons and mothers. But undergirding that broad subtext is a more acutely disturbing familial back-and-forth between Beau and Mona.

When Beau finally returns to the house he grew up in during the movie's climax, he sees the remnants of the memorial service he missed, and a wall of photos Mona placed on the wall. Noticeably, the oldest photos from when he was a child are all of Mona doting on her little boy. Yet as the years pass, Beau becomes increasingly absent until the modern Mona's pride is all about the business she built: Her face the visage of an empire, made literal by a collage of employees (including Roger!) who together form Mona's larger countenance.

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The workers she controls, and who refuse to disappoint her, are Mona's pride and joy; Beau is the disappointment that goes unmentioned. As Aster alluded in our Q&A, "She wanted a glamorous son and he's such a dweeb." Beau is, however, the son Mona made him to be by eliciting such codependency that whenever there is a flicker of resistance—such as when he explains he can't come visit her that day because he cannot lock his apartment's front door—she will build elaborate tests that involve faking her own death and paying a doctor's family to keep Beau in guilty agony.

Mona wants a son she can be proud of and is disgusted at the man Beau became, although she played a strong hand in that. Parents mold their children, and by convincing Beau if he ever had sex he would die, Mona intentionally destroyed his confidence to ever pursue a glamorous life equivalent to her own.

This is echoed in the WASP-ier seeming family of Roger and Grace, and their refusal to accept the death of their elder son. Their apparently years (decade?) long grief causes their teenage daughter to feel neglected and in need to lash out—to the point where she literally kills herself by swallowing paint in her dead brother's bedroom. Beau lacks the spine to do something that openly antagonistic to his mother, at least for the first 45 to 50 years of

his life. Instead he merely dreams of conquering her.

So as the film careens increasingly into the surreal during its climax, the movie becomes essentially a therapeutic exercise about debating where Beau went wrong: nature versus nurture. Mona is aware of the therapy-language Beau has attempted to use to explain their relationship. She's even paying his therapist to tell her what he whines about! But she claims Beau's problems are all from his own failures, which he refuses to take responsibility for. Mona insists that she has nothing to do with her son's hang-ups. And he is shockingly infantile, but still the lady doth protest too much in a movie that begins its climax with Beau, on the day of his mother's funeral, fucking another brunette woman in his mother's bed.

The Oedipal overtones, both in terms of Greek mythology and Freudian psychology, are thick. Mona raised Beau to only have one important woman, or person in his life, and she's it. Sleeping with his childhood crush is just a substitution. And if this Oedipus is raised to believe he has no father, then there is only one person left for him to kill in order to complete Sophocles' tragedy...

This leads us to the movie's most bizarre and hallucinogenic moments. Mona reveals to Beau that he had a twin brother who talked back and was left in an attic to rot his whole life. Up there is also Beau's actual father, [a giant, 12-foot penis and testicles with arms and teeth](#). Are those creatures in the attic real, and if not, what then murders that guy who breaks in through the window other than the proverbial one-eyed cyclops we see smash his head in?

Honestly, I cannot make a whole hell of a lot of sense out of these particularly indulgent flourishes by Aster, except to say that this is confirmation of Mona's own neuroses which she passed down to her son.

She never had interest in a man other than as a literal tool to help procreate her own child. But if she saw the male anatomy as little more than a monster, like something out of Homer, then that skewed vision of masculine desires was ingrained in Beau, who like his mother sees his sexuality as a monstrous thing that must be hidden away lest it kill him and others.

Beau has no father, no lover, no future. Just his mom. When he even tries to leave his mother's house again, she asks him where would he go? There's no answer other than for our meek Oedipus to play out his entire psychodrama on the only person that matters: a mama whom he murders with his bare hands.

Return to the Womb

When summing up the movie, Lane told us, "I think only Ari and his therapist could tell you *exactly* what it's about, but it's putting an audience through someone's entire life and then in many ways we become the judge at the end."

So it is that Beau stands before a tribunal of everyone in the world he's ever known, and as it turns out they're all strangers or on mom's payroll. None of them care if he lives or dies, much less that he's having a panic attack in front of them that will swallow him as whole as the water beneath his feet.

However, it's the moments before Beau enters this cave which are the most striking. As Mona warned her son, after she's gone for good, Beau will have nowhere left in the world to be. What is out there for him? The only time he appeared untroubled, carefree, maybe even happy is when he was inside his mother's womb at the beginning of the movie. After the doctor smacked him on the ass, it all went downhill.

So when his little motorboat glides into a cave out in the sea, he instinctually

seems to be seeking the warmth and safety of that womb, and the brief time when his and Mona's relationship was a healthy thing. When he's condemned at the end to a seemingly watery grave, he is actually being forced to accept the only place he ever felt comfortable.

Her creature in Richard Kind's doctor speaks for likely many audience members who demand Beau take some accountability. He's roughly 50 years old and he still is whining to a shrink about mommy. At a certain point, it's his own fault he never found love, and his refusal to accept that disgusts Mona and probably many a viewer. Nonetheless, she prepared him for nothing in this world except to be afraid of it. She damned him to think she is his only confidant, and her cradle becomes his grave.

Beau Is Afraid is in theaters now.

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