

Cinema of the united states and classical hollywood assignment

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How far does Casablanca represent ' the culmination of Classic Hollywood's thematic and formal strategies' (Robert B. Ray)? In answering the question, we must first establish what is typical of classical Hollywood. Classical Hollywood films have certain symmetry about them; they follow a set of norms and conventions which limits individual innovation. It is primarily concerned with being narrative. The ultimate goal of classical Hollywood is to tell a story that is not ambiguous and in fact, easy for the viewer to understand.

It is evident in the opening shots in Casablanca that the film conforms to the basic principles of Classical Hollywood's narrative structure. In the opening scene there is a narrative voice over explaining the political context of what we are seeing. This, along with the tracking shot in Rick's Cafe of the many nationalities grouped together in one location; help the audience to establish a global context of what is going on.

The viewer is not left to figure anything out for themselves, therefore conforming to this unambiguous typical narrative structure. Classical Hollywood is also defined by its two storylines: a topical one and a melodramatic one. The melodramatic storyline concerns a heterosexual romance, and it often intertwines and overlaps with the topical storyline. In the case of Casablanca, the topical theme concerns the coming of World War II, and the melodrama concerns the Rick-Ilsa-Laszlo love triangle.

The melodrama is typically the main plot of the film, and it is due to this reason that such a narrative outline of the global and political context of the war takes place as this clarity allows the viewer to focus more on the

heterosexual love triangle rather than trying to comprehend the global context as well. Typical of Classical Hollywood, *Casablanca* follows a linear narrative, with one exception. Everything happens in a chronological order, it begins by establishing the global and political context which as a result allows the audience to understand the reasons for what is happening between the characters later in the film.

There is however a flashback that takes place early on in the film which arguably disrupts this linear narrative. Usually such a flashback would be regarded as a disruption to the linear flow; however in the case of *Casablanca* such a flashback is actually serving a purpose. Without it, we would not have any idea of the previous relationship between Rick and Ilsa, and the hostility Rick has towards Ilsa when they meet again would have confused the spectator and caused an ambiguous situation.

Thus the flashback is helping the audience piece together the love story between Rick and Ilsa. Also fairly abiding to the classical Hollywood conventions is the character of Rick. He is immediately established as the main character in the film through the juxtaposition of the character in location (Rick's Cafe) in the opening scene. Rick is initially portrayed as a noire jaded character with constant emphasis on how he does not drink with his customers, and shots of him drinking alone and more strange perhaps, playing chess, a game that is regarded as social, alone.

The camera shots of him also assist in depicting this noire character as initially no full shot of him is given to us; he is left as a mystery. Perhaps his character is addressing the issue that classical Hollywood will at some point

grow all, but he does however conform to a type that has to transform. Rick is initially denied full identity and portrayed as a shady character perhaps. And indeed the plot follows the journey of his character from this jaded, noire character into a caring one that sacrifices his personal desires for the greater cause by giving Laszlo the letters of transit.

This is similar to *Gone with the Wind* which two selfish characters come around in the final moment. However what is unconventional and does not follow the norms of a typical classical Hollywood film, is the ending. Classical Hollywood would usually end with a formation of a Romantic couple, in the case of *Casablanca*, this would be Rick and Ilsa. However the ending of *Casablanca* appears to be predominantly unconventional with regards to the fact that that Rick and Ilsa do not end up leaving together. In this case, love is sacrificed for the greater cause.

Typically in classic Hollywood, no conflict would arise between the political and the personal, the two would co-operate and no painful choices would have to be made. However one could argue that the ending is conventional as there is still a slight sense of ambiguity over who Ilsa is really in love with, her husband or Rick, whom she had a brief affair with once upon a time in Paris. When Ilsa visits Rick in his apartment to get the letters of transit, she suggests that it is him whom she is in love with. However perhaps this declaration of love had an ulterior motive in which she just wanted the letters of transit so that she could leave with the man she truly desired, her husband Laszlo. In the final scene Ilsa does not actually make any formal declaration of love to Rick, this may be due to the fact that Laszlo is in ear

shot or it could be that she didn't actually love him and she was not prepared to lie again. Ultimately, she leaves with Laszlo, however this decision is forced upon her by Rick. Perhaps Rick is sacrificing love for the greater cause or alternatively perhaps he is betraying Ilsa as she had betrayed him in Paris.