

Passion and
preference on film: a
thematic analysis of
chris columbus' rent
essay...



I. Introduction The movie entitled *Rent*, directed by Chris Columbus and released in 2005, is based on the original Broadway success penned by the late Jonathan Larson. It centers on the ups and downs, and comings and goings of a group of young people in New York City's East Village during the late 1980s to early 90s. Staying true to Larson's intentions as seen in the musical, Columbus cast many of the original members in the film version. With much of the story taking place in or having connections with a specific apartment, the extent of involvement each one has in each other's lives forms the motivation and objectives. In the midst of relationship and friendship tangles—including rekindling old flames and starting new ones—financial issues and political objectives, drug habits and lost ambitions, and sexual preferences and fatal illnesses, the spirit of individualism among many, and the promise of being allowed to live the way one wants, are all colorfully and movingly depicted.

The film, being prolific to a large extent, conveys several themes in the course of story development. For this paper, the themes of passion, and homosexuality will take center stage. II. Homosexuality, AIDS, and the Repercussions of Choice In the story, four characters are described to be homosexual or have homosexual tendencies—Collins, Angel, Maureen, and Joanne. The four characters somehow act as each others' counterpoint personalities, with Collins and Maureen being of arguable degrees of gayness, and Angel and Joanne of the more determined choices.

The idea of homosexuality and the relationships that operate within the concept are not the focus in the film; showing these already as a given, Larson went a level higher and bravely exposed the dangers of standing by

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your choices. Taking into consideration the era when the musical was written, which marked the start of the ultimate effect of AIDS, homosexuals had to hold on to the good brought by their sexuality, which was bound with the reality of partnership. This holds true, however, only with Collins and Angel—Maureen and Joanne, being lesbians and pseudo-lesbians, were not necessarily directly affected by the virus. But there are two other characters, Mimi, Roger, and a mention of his ex-girlfriend April, who both have and had their lives controlled by AIDS. Compared to the positive outlook Collins and Angel have regarding their health, Mimi appears controlled by her illness and problems, and April was already dead, having committed suicide after learning she had AIDS.

Many see the characters in the film as being anti-authority and anti-bourgeois (Focus on the Family, 2008), yet a less general interpretation of their unorthodox choices needs to be equated with the particular needs of each person. This also coincides with the degree of outward homosexuality they exhibit—Collins the reserved gay, Angel the drag queen, Maureen the radical femme, and Joanne the no-nonsense lesbian. They each have their own reasons for making their choices, therefore it is wrong to lump them all in one sweeping category. The degree of adherence to the rules of establishment is dependent on the person's confidence in his or her sexuality, which then relegates Maureen into a box that may echo the anti-authority opinion. Homosexuality has often been thought of as an act of rebellion against society's unwillingness to accept their idiosyncrasies (Binnie, 2004), and, not at the very least, their choice to have relations or entertain ideas of such with individuals of the same sex.

The more extreme right even considers AIDS a necessary component of homosexuality, for gays to 'rethink' their allegedly sinful lifestyles. But in the context of today's world and today's concerns, almost twenty years since the time frame set in *Rent*, AIDS is affecting more and more gay men—and reports say that the prime victims are younger men (Kershaw, 2008). The combination of what used to be the young person's ideal scenario—being young and with a career, living in New York—has now turned into the bleakest version of all: too young and gay to be alone in cold New York, with no job, and just recently been diagnosed with HIV. Hopefully, in the end, young gay men would still remember the poignant story of Angel and Collins, who practically set aside the real issues of health and focused instead on what is available in the here and now—these days, youth is no longer a force field; in many cases, the ignorance and reluctance to make an informed stand about life and the choices it offers.

III. Youth, Being Young, and Being Young With a Passion
The crazy combination of a multitude of characters, all young people obviously on a search for identity, is perhaps the most successful device pulled off by the musical, and then in the movie. However, unlike most portrayals of multiple friendships set in posh apartment buildings with a luxurious pool in the midst of such an oasis, *Rent* is tasked to discuss the travails of living in the most competitive locale in the world, wherein probably the only tie to maintaining one's sanity is the presence of a support system. Together, they may be able to overcome the reality of rejection, failed relationships, and unrealized careers. Ironically, New York is often posed as the bastion of hope and dreams coming true; but in a setting like *Rent*'s may force a young person to

redefine his or her goals and apply the present parameters of the culture that will not adjust itself to accommodate anyone. Mark's hopes of becoming a filmmaker had to be reformulated to please the best available choice—that of being a sort of director for human interest stories. Not exactly the wealth of creative freedom he had hoped for, but, hey, it was better than nothing.

And it was better than most other options taken by other young people who were not as fortunate. The angst-ridden Mimi, the stereotype of the bright young girl who had her acting dreams crushed and forced her to take on the least attractive job of being an exotic dancer. Perhaps the best example of shattered dreams would be Collins himself, being a philosophy professor whose life had been changed by AIDS. Then again there are those that represent the segment of achieved aspirations, in the person of Benny—except that his success was not brought on by his efforts alone; his relationship with a woman from a rich family sealed his ideal fate.

But the greatness of *Rent* is its ability to speak to a whole generation of young people, in its specific address of even suburban middle class youth (Sigl, 2008). Particularly in this day and age, when choices abound and technology has brought about changes one would never have believed would happen in the late 1980s. The singular understanding of emotional rush and irrationality in the youth is obviously the factor that keeps *Rent* on everyone's list. Acceptance and identity through belonging is the biggest need of young people, and this vulnerability makes them attractive to groups of malicious intent (Gwinn, 2006). Passion will always be a quality attached to young people, and dreams are the manifestation.

In this context, the best example of passion and dreams is Maureen, the performance artist whose passion has led her to exercise her own right to speech. But, like the young person she is, she is also prone to impulsive proclamations of her varying preferences, such as the shift from being heterosexual to homosexual. It may even be deduced that Maureen's penchant for drama, as an artist, influences the more important decisions she has to make. This definitely affects those who have made their final life choices, like Joanne and her firm resolve towards keeping her relationship with Maureen. Passion still is what drives Benny, who is willing to sacrifice everything he had been associated with just to achieve the dreams he had set for himself; "selling out" is how it is termed in the film, and Benny's minuscule effort at remorse or change reflects the higher level of passion in him than integrity. In the reality constructed by *Rent*, passion may not be the sole force that dictates the future of these young people—events showed them that unavoidable circumstances such as HIV, AIDS, and death may figure in the equations they had created for their individual lives.

Even in the construct of the Olympics, passion is not the sole reason for success: it is always a mixture of determination and complete knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses. It is knowing how to use one's youth as a competitive edge, and, in the presence of others who are young as well, the ability to identify what sets them apart as individuals. IV. That Other New York Story Martin Scorsese's 1977 film *New York, New York*, top-billing Liza Minelli, is also a depiction of failures and successes in the city that never sleeps. However, since this film is set in the aftermath of World War II,

consistency with reality and relevance to current times may not be as profound as what *Rent* presents.

Most typical of a love story, *New York, New York* is centered on the music within the film. Obviously, the story may have become merely a background to showcase the singer's exemplary talents, unlike the creative integration of music and story in Larson's work. *New York, New York* indeed enjoyed much approval from audiences, and remains a classic to this day—but the use of the locale as the movie's title may have been a better fit for *Rent*, since the latter managed to expose the various joys and ills of existing in the place. V. Conclusion Homosexuality and passion are but two of the themes explored in *Rent*, and further study would definitely reap a few more insights that are relevant to more audiences, the same way the two featured themes called out to gays and young, idealistic people. This just shows the richness and wealth of the tapestry created by Jonathan Larson, who clearly had a firm grasp on the realities of New York.

It will not be surprising to find *Rent* re-staged once more in the future, and the film enjoying a re-telling, because everyone, whether they are in New York or not, will find themselves in at least one of the characters and stories in this brilliant work.