

# Analysis of gangs of new york essay sample



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In 2002, Martin Scorsese teamed up with Miramax Films to direct *Gangs of New York*, a film he had dreamed of making since the 1970s. With a \$97 million budget, the film was a box-office flop, grossing only \$190 million worldwide. Nevertheless, *Gangs of New York* earned 10 Academy Award nominations, and won two Golden Globe Awards for Best Director and Best Song, "The Hands That Built America" by U2 (<http://www.imdb.com>).

### The Cast and the Plot

The three main characters in *Gangs of New York* are Amsterdam Vallon (Leonardo DiCaprio), William Cutting aka Bill 'the Butcher' (Daniel Day-Lewis), and Jenny Everdeane (Cameron Diaz). Other notable characters include Priest Vallon, Amsterdam's father (Liam Neeson), Johnny Sirocco (Henry Thomas), and 'Happy' Jack Mulroney (John C. Reilly).

The story opened in 1846 at the Five Points in New York City, known today as Lower Manhattan. Amsterdam's father, Priest Vallon, was the leader of a gang of Irish immigrants called "The Dead Rabbits". Bill Cutting was the leader of a street gang called "The Natives", which was comprised of first generation Americans. The Natives were racist toward all immigrants, and they resented the fact that so many Irish had taken over New York. The Irish, on the other hand, resented being treated like second-class citizens. Gang warfare broke out between these two rival gangs. Six-year-old Amsterdam Vallon watched the grisly fight unfold in the streets of the Five Points, and he witnessed Bill Cutting murder Priest Vallon in cold blood. Amsterdam escaped, and an orphanage incarcerated him for sixteen years.

In 1862, Amsterdam returned to New York City as a young man, intent on seeking revenge for his father's death. Keeping his identity a secret, Amsterdam befriended Bill ' the Butcher' so he could deceitfully gain his trust and murder him. Bill and his gang controlled all of Five Points and had their hand in everything from politics to thievery, strong-arming, and murder. Bill ran the town by fear, and he did not hesitate to humiliate and murder anyone who double-crossed him.

### Theatrical Elements

The setting of the movie is magnificent and believable, taking the viewer back in time to New York City in the mid 1800s. The buildings, carriage horses, and props were reminiscent of the time. The shack-like houses in the Five Points, in contrast to the uptown mansions, were very revealing of the different lifestyles between lower and upper class societies.

Martin Scorsese filmed *\_Gangs of New York\_* on location in Rome, Italy after several years of research. When he finished his research, he had five books full of information to give to the set designer. The set designer started with technical drawings, then moved on to models, and finally began to build the set. The entire set took five months to build, and required a staff of painters, sculptures, and plasterers. The completed set was so extravagant and realistic that John C. Reilly, who played ' Happy' Jack, said it made his job easy. He did not need to imagine being there because he felt like he really was there (" *Gangs of New York Special Features*", 2002).

The characters in *\_Gangs of New York\_* were dressed in very elaborate costumes. Many of the men wore foot tall top hats, brightly colored striped

or checkered pants, or tuxedo-tail suits. These seemed odd, yet somehow fit, and were visually fabulous. The women wore long flowing corset dresses. The Irish immigrants and other gang members wore tattered shirts and pants with suspenders to reflect the poverty they faced. The red stripes worn by members of "The Dead Rabbits" were done in a primitive way with man-made stripes to emphasize how poor they were.

Altogether there were seven thousand costumes made for the movie. The costumes were not historically correct, but the costume designer based them on the era. Martin Scorsese believed it was a very colorful period, so the costume designer stylized the costumes to heighten the fantasy. Liam Neeson felt the coat he wore as Priest Vallon defined whom the character was; therefore, he had to wear the coat in every scene. A group of women from the 1850s called the 'dress reformers', who wore trousers under their dresses, inspired the costumes worn by the Five Points women ("Gangs of New York Special Features", 2002).

Daniel Day-Lewis, who played Bill Cutting, wore a fake mustache, side burns, and a wig for his role. Diaz, who played Jenny Everdeane, wore subtle eye shadow and lipstick. Many of the male extras and supporting actors wore side burns, goatees, or beards, and most of the characters wore subtle or no make-up. The women of Five Points looked dirty and unkept, while the wealthier women had every hair in place and wore brightly colored make-up.

This movie contained a mix of lighting techniques. During the more somber moments, such as during gang fights or the Civil War draft riots, the skies appeared overcast and gloomy while snow covered the ground. In upbeat

scenes, outdoor lighting was sunny and bright. For indoor scenes, the filmmaker used predominantly low side lighting and backlighting to achieve a shadowy, dark effect, which gave the movie a dark, gloomy appearance.

Daniel Day-Lewis did a superb job as Bill ' the Butcher'. In fact, he carried the entire movie. One member of our group felt Leonardo performed his role impressively and with all the vigilance of a person seeking revenge. Another member of our team was disappointed in both Leonardo and Cameron's performance. The latter felt both actors failed to create charismatic or memorable characters. Diaz, in particular, had a very disappointing character role. If the director had removed her character from the script entirely, the movie would not have changed. DiCaprio came across as more of a wimp than as a hero. Further, he failed miserably at maintaining an Irish-American accent. In some scenes, viewers can detect a slight Irish accent in Leonardo's dialect. However, throughout the majority of the movie, his Irish accent was completely gone.

Gangs of New York included a number of elaborate props that blended well with the costumes and setting. Birdcages with small birds inside appeared repeatedly throughout the movie. In one scene, women were dangling from the ceiling in large birdcages. A human-sized puppet of Satan, suspiciously resembling Bill ' the Butcher', visibly hung outside a building. In one scene, Bill sent the decapitated head of a pig as a warning message to a newly elected Irish politician. The American flag frequented the backdrop of many scenes, as well as an old photo of the fallen Priest Vallon. Knives, horse drawn carriages, large ships, coffins, and large wooden barrels were common throughout the film. Statues of native Indians and eagles were also present, <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-gangs-of-new-york-essay-sample/>

and Bill Cutting wore a glass eye with an artificial cornea shaped like a patriotic bald eagle. A knife, which belonged to Amsterdam's father, was a significant prop, as well as a club owned by Walter "Monk" McGinn. McGinn had engraved a notch on the club for every man he had killed. The candles in the windows of the townspeople seemed symbolic of their acceptance of the gang riots.

### Cinematography

Gangs of New York was highly acclaimed for its cinematography achievements, and Scorsese did a fantastic job directing the various shots and angles in the film. The director used medium shots frequently, which allowed the viewer to absorb the magnificent setting and costumes in all their visual glory. He also used close-up shots when appropriate, usually in the subjective point-of-view. The most frequently used angles were eye-level shots; however, the filmmaker also used low-angle shots in some scenes to make the characters appear taller and more powerful, and he used high-angle shots when he wanted to make the characters appear weaker. Throughout the movie, the director positioned characters and props in various locations on the set to create an effective depth of field.

The cinematographer used a variety of camera movements. Pan, tilt, and zoom movements are common. Panning was most noticeable after gang fights so the audience could fully view the destruction when the fight had ended. During fight scenes and riots, the cinematographer used multiple cameras set in fixed-frame movement to depict every angle imaginable. In many scenes, the movie used mobile cameras, which made the audience

feel as though they were following the action. The cinematographer also used mobile cameras to provide the audience with a more magnificent view of the setting.

One of the most memorable cinematic moments in the film was at the very end when the shot focused on the gravestones of Bill Cutting and Amsterdam Vallon. Initially, the city in the background of the headstone shot resembled 1862 New York City. In a very smooth transitional effect that took place before the viewer's eyes, the filmmaker modernized New York City through various sequence shots that reflected the developing stages in the city's history until finally a modern-day New York City filled the backdrop of the headstones. In the aftermath of 9/11, this special effect succeeded in provoking a strong emotional response from the viewer.

### Editing and Sound

With some exceptions, the film editor successfully edited the scenes in \_Gangs of New York\_ to make the transitions smooth and seamless with proper time continuity. The film used many parallel cuts for scene transitions and inside out editing for flash back scenes. While most transitions appeared seamless, at least one scene transition was more obvious. In a quiet, serious scene between Bill and Amsterdam, the audience could hear a loud clapping crowd from the next scene before the scene transition occurred. Our team also caught a conflict in time continuity during one film sequence. In a scene where Bill and Amsterdam were toasting over a glass of wine, the first shot showed full wine glasses. In the second shot, the glasses were empty. In the third shot, the glasses were half full again. It appears as though the editor

overlooked the time continuity of this scene when putting these shots together.

The film editor used short and long takes to achieve specific effects. The movie used short takes in each of the fight scenes to create the illusion of high-speed action, tension, confusion, and suspense. The movie used long takes in a scene where Jenny was dancing with Amsterdam at a party, and again during a scene soon after Bill was shot. In the latter scene, Bill ' the Butcher' was sitting in a chair beside Amsterdam's bed having a deep conversation with Amsterdam. The long take was necessary to sustain the momentum of the conversation between Bill and Amsterdam because Bill was explaining an element that was important to the story.

The movie very effectively used sound and music to heighten the suspense and drama. The filmmaker used diegetic sounds, such the sound of knives flying through the air, to heighten tension. The movie used non-diegetic sounds, such as upbeat rock music that resembled a patriotic march to war, for scenes that preceded a gang fight. During gang fight scenes, intense rock music seemed to synchronize the choreography of the gang fight. The musical score was extremely effective in heightening the tension and drama before and during fight scenes.

### The Whole Package

Two of our team members did not enjoy \_Gangs of New York, \_ while the other two did find it entertaining. In spite of the magnificent costumes, props, and setting, and an outstanding performance by Daniel Day-Lewis, \_Gangs of New York\_ had a thin plot, the dialogue was pretentious, DiCaprio

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and Diaz's performances were lackluster at best, and the movie lacked a deep message. Through the entire course of the film, the audience did not learn anything new about the main characters that they did not already learn during the opening scenes of the movie. As a result, character development was almost non-existent, which made it difficult to relate to the characters. This three-hour movie was too long and too violent. Scorsese should have shortened this film to only two hours.

Three out of four of our team members would not openly recommend this movie. However, we might recommend it to someone who is not particularly sensitive to violence, or who may find the historical value of the story or the quality of the cinematography interesting. We thoroughly enjoyed learning about the history of New York City during this era. The cinematography was stunning and worthy of the Academy Award nominations. Nonetheless, *Gangs of New York* had the potential to be an epic, but Scorsese did not fully live up to that potential.

## References

Gangs of New York (2002). Retrieved February 4, 2005, from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0217505/>

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