

Textual analysis of barton fink and the night of the hunter essay examples

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Films, in and of themselves, ostensibly carry meaning (whether intentional or not) and thematic/narrative messages that are conveyed in various ways (King, 2001). The many elements that comprise the moving image and story of a film - performance, mise-en-scene, cinematography, sound, and more - are the tools used by filmmakers and actors to convey these messages. Whether explicit or implicit, the message and overall meaning of a film can be derived from a close examination of these elements. Two films that use these elements to a great extent to convey their meaning - Barton Fink and The Night of the Hunter - will be examined through these elements, and the themes that they convey.

Barton Fink

The Coen Brothers' 1991 film Barton Fink, written during a time of writer's block when penning their next film Miller's Crossing, is a stylized depiction of Hollywood in the 1940s, and the intellectual's hubristic attempt to distance themselves from (and yet attempt to understand) the Hollywood system and the "common man" (Beller, 1994). Barton Fink's journey from insecure but successful Broadway playwright to destroyed Hollywood screenwriter is conveyed through copious use of symbolism and imagery, placing the character in increasingly abstracted situations and settings to convey his own mind, his perspective and that of the world around him.

Barton, as a character, vacillates between neuroticism and insecurity about his work to extreme pride and confidence. Much of this comes through in Turturro's performance, which is shifty, measured and frenetic - when Barton is in his element, or a position of power (as in his early conversations with Charlie (John Goodman), he is overconfident to the point of ignoring and

putting off his peers. However, most of the time, he kowtows before studio executives, writers whom he admires, and people who treat him like a king (even to the point of kissing his feet in one scene).

The cinematography and mise-en-scene of the Hotel Earle, where Barton does much of his writing and living, is described by him as being "less Hollywood" than the rest of Hollywood, and the room in which he stays seems to symbolically embody Barton's mind over the course of the film. In a very deliberate choice to foreshadow the end of the film, Barton's entrance into the Earle is preceded by a shot of waves crashing along rocks; this points us both to the small picture of a girl in repose on the beach in the room and the recreation of that picture on the real beach, which closes out the film. The hotel hallways are wallpapered a sick green color, and the long shots of hallways are filmed with a high depth of field to make them seem to endlessly stretch on and on. The eerie placement of leather shoes in front of every door in the hallway in several scenes lends it a ghostly presence.

Barton's room himself is indicative of the barriers he puts up, and his own self-delusion. In many scenes, the brown wallpaper above his bed starts to peel off; Barton rolls it back up, but we constantly see the ugly, wet, sweaty glue squeeze through the cracks and show up on his hands. If Barton's room is his mind, we could see this motif as the "wallpaper" he puts up around the ugliness in his character that lies underneath, as personified by the disgusting glue. The small picture of the woman in repose, set directly above his typewriter, is his one window of brightness - what he turns to when he desires to escape the confining prison of his mind. However, his typewriter,

which is constantly shown in close-up as the keys hammer away (or don't), constantly haunts him with its silence. The few lines of text he has written, banal descriptions of a tenement in the Lower East Side, alternatively haunt him and play into his delusions of being the greatest writer in the world, as evidenced by the scene where he hallucinates those lines superimposed over the first two verses of Genesis.

Much of the sound design and mise-en-scene is designed to illustrate Turturro's writer's block, as well as his inability to relate to other people despite his claims that he writes for "the common man". We frequently see him hearing muffled noises through walls: first, there is the laughing that causes him to complain about Charlie; then, he struggles to hear Ben Geisler's conversation over the phone in his office before their first meeting; furthermore, he hears W. P. Mayhew's vomiting in the bathroom stall during that lunch meeting. Through this motif, we see Barton constantly trying to get in touch with people through walls and barriers, either of his own making or theirs. Even when he speaks to people, he has difficulty communicating; it is only when he goes on about his own art and success that he seems to be energetic and full of vigor. This indicates that Barton, despite claiming to want to know the plight of the "common man," secretly holds him in disdain; he picks the Hotel Earle to find a more 'real' experience, but seems disgusted with the discomfoting nature of the place. When he speaks with Charlie for the first time, and Charlie attempts to offer his experience as the common man ("Well, I've got some stories-") Barton interrupts him constantly to prattle on about his idealistic desires for theater. Here, the self-

absorption of Barton is clear; Barton is a high-class intellectual who is unable to actually relate clearly to the common man due to his own self-absorption (Beller, 1994).

Barton's open disdain for Hollywood and his hidden disdain for the common man (as simpletons who, as implied through dialogue in the aforementioned scene, don't know how his mind works) are very clear throughout the film. By the end of the film, his own mind and world is upset symbolically through the scene with Charlie raging demonically through the hallway, shouting his own mantra of the "life of the mind." Charlie, the real voice of the common man, chastises Barton for not listening to him, and notes his own greater understanding of the world that Barton, in his New York ivory tower, does not actually understand. His final act before leaving is to use his brute strength (something both indicative of the "common man" that Barton stereotypes and the wrestler characters he does not have enough enthusiasm to write about) to literally break the bars that keep him enslaved from his preconceptions, before leaving just as mysteriously as he appeared.

Night of the Hunter

Charles Laughton's 1955 offbeat noir thriller *The Night of the Hunter*, starring Robert Mitchum as a charismatic and predatory self-appointed preacher turned serial killer, uses German Expressionism-inspired cinematography and mise-en-scene, anchored through Mitchum's lead performance, to explore themes of religion, good versus evil, and the relation of man to nature.

The film begins with the credits over a starfield, as Lillian Gish sings a cheerful hymn (a recurring motif throughout the soundtrack of the film). Eventually, she actually appears in the starfield, telling a group of young children (whose disembodied heads are also aligned in an arc, staring out at the audience as the film intercuts between these two images) about the threat of a wolf in sheep's clothing. We then fade to Harry Powell (Mitchum), a sharply-dressed and handsome man driving a car down the road, talking to God openly about his crimes and murders (thus demonstrating he is an unrepentant killer, and we the audience should be wary of him). The beginning scenes of the film show both him and the father of the child protagonists, Ben Harper (Peter Graves) getting arrested and convicted. The single-shot scenes of their respective convictions are filmed the exact same way, with the same judge, sitting high and far away in his bench, noting the parallel scenes and situations that will bring them together.

Eventually, Reverend Harry manages to get a clue from Ben before Ben is executed that the money he hid away may be in the care of his children; therefore, like the aforementioned wolf in sheep's clothing, he arrives in the town with the express purpose of wooing their mother, Willa (Shelley Winters). Mitchum's performance is meant to echo the 'wolf in sheep's clothing' motif, combining both charisma and instability, proving himself adept at charming everyone in the small town Willa and the children, John and Pearl, live in. Harry, throughout the film, represents evil; he is often presented in shadow and silhouette, sometimes riding in a car or on a horse, with a distinctive wide-brimmed hat to give him a signature, devilish

silhouette. His tattoos on each of his knuckles - one hand saying " LOVE" and another saying " HATE" - exemplifies his persona toward others; he constantly puts on a veneer of love and charisma, which hides the hateful, murderous reality underneath.

The mise-en-scene of the film is indicative of German Expressionist films of the 1920s - dramatic use of light and shadow are used in many shots, as well as strange camera angles and an emphasis on symmetrical and abstract settings. In the scene where Willa finally figures out what Harry is up to, the house is surrounded in fog, and Willa is standing dramatically outside it in the distance. Eventually, as Willa lays in bed, talking to Harry about Ben's existence leering over them like a shadow, the cinematography alternates between two shots. The first is a wide shot of the bedroom, with a high triangular ceiling like a church, light shining through the window as Mitchum looks up and reaches toward the night sky. The second is a closeup of Willa, light shining on her alone, enveloping her body in what seems to be a coffin made of light, foreshadowing her death. This scene and others lends the film a storybook, fairytale quality, made all the more apparent by the bookending of Rachel Cooper's storytelling - the film is meant to be a fable much like Biblical tales, full of moral messages and broad strokes of plotting.

One of these moral messages is the fight between good and evil, personified respectively by the children/Rachel Cooper (the sheep) and Harry (the wolf). Soon, the children become aware of Harry's evil nature, and manage to run off with the money (hidden in Pearl's doll) in a small boat down the river. This then leads to a long, protracted sequence of the children floating down the

river. The sequence is filmed in a succession of shots that see the boat float slowly down the river, against a peaceful yet ominous black sky. They often float past various animals, including turtles and rabbits (the rabbits themselves symbolize the children in a later scene), linking their own flight to escaping from civilization into nature, which is presented in the film as good. One night, as they rest in a barn, the director notes the passage of time with a series of fades that sees an otherworldly-looking moon rise further and further into the night sky. Awakening in the middle of the night, John sees Harry, on a horse and in silhouette, stalking them from afar. "When does he ever sleep?" muses Harry, thus hinting that Mitchum's character is less of a human being and more a symbolic representation of ever-present evil.

Religion is another large theme in this movie, and the way it is used by both good and evil is depicted through performance and cinematography. At the climax of the film, the children are under old Rachel Cooper's care, and Harry is lying in wait in the middle of the night outside their house, mostly in shadow and silhouette. He starts singing the hymn "Leaning," within earshot of Rachel, who eventually joins in through the window, as she sits also in silhouette, shotgun in hand. This scene conveys these messages with hard divisions between light and shadow playing across their still forms both inside and outside the house. As the song ends, Rachel's daughter Ruby turns on the lights, obscuring the view of Harry from outside the window - when the lights turn off a second later, Harry is gone. This is filmic and narrative depiction of the strange kinship that good and evil have in the

world - extending the metaphor of Harry's " LOVE" and " HATE" tattoos throughout the entire film (King, 2001).

In conclusion, cinema creates meaning and conveys its themes and messages through the use of filmic elements such as mise-en-scene, cinematography, sound, performance and more, as evidenced through the way these elements instill meaning in Barton Fink and The Night of the Hunter. The mise-en-scene, the use of imagery and the writing/performances in Barton Fink demonstrate the difficulties in writing what you do not know, the delusions of intellectualism that presumes to know the lower classes as something alien and in need of discovery, and the inherent dehumanization of creative minds working in Hollywood and struggling to find reality. Barton loses himself inside his own mind, and refuses to see the ugliness and selfishness inside him until the common man he so pretends to idolize burns those barriers down around him. Meanwhile, The Night of the Hunter explores the varying natures of good and evil through the use of light and shadow, Expressionistic framing, and the citing of religious and Christian themes throughout the work. Harry's character is the thematic wolf in sheep's clothing, who attempts to ensnare children through his charming and deceptive ways; however, with the help of virtuous and kind mother figures, as well as their own resourcefulness, the children " abide and they endure," as stated in the line that closes the film.

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