

Free term paper on dark adventure: irony and ambiguity in 'lawrence of arabia'

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Few films of the post-World-War-II era so powerfully and artfully embody the epic adventure film genre like *Lawrence of Arabia*. And perhaps no film adventure offers such a complex, dualistic and purposely ambiguous twist as David Lean's 1962 masterpiece. Set against the backdrop of World War I in the Middle East, *Lawrence of Arabia* is a film that matches in personality and depth its enigmatic subject, T. E. Lawrence, a man whose legend came to symbolize British imperial intrepidity and yet who was eventually overwhelmed and destroyed by his own fame. It is, by halves, a bold and engaging saga turned to a dark, psychological descent into self-destruction. *Lawrence of Arabia* exists today as an icon of modern film, a fascinating personality study and irresistible adventure.

The first half of the film follows Lawrence as he progresses from minor staff member in Cairo, to errand boy for the Foreign Ministry's Arab Bureau and, by virtue of his own daring, determination and initiative, to war hero and international celebrity. Lean and screenwriter Robert Bolt portray him as a fascinating but troubled young man, a brilliant soldier and skilled diplomat but prone to vanity and the attentions of famous and powerful men, like Prince Feisal and General Allenby. The film's second half resolves hints at Lawrence's emotional instability, which is exacerbated by the increasingly cynical and manipulative way in which the British use him to help deceive his Arab friends into believing that the Empire intends only to help chase off the Turks. As events outstrip his ability to control them, Lawrence is caught between the contending political interests of the British and the Arab royal house. Having led the Arab army in taking Damascus, Lawrence is finally fully compromised and shunted off, quietly, back to England.

The film follows a linear, sequential narrative style told in flashback, as Lawrence's former acquaintances and superiors muse on his career after his funeral. Throughout the film, Lean skillfully intersperses the perspectives of multiple characters on Lawrence's motivations, character and shortcomings as events expose more and more of his personal vulnerability. Lawrence is shown gradually degrading into a brutal, sadistic state, the nadir of which is his permitting of the Arab force to fall on and slaughter a helpless Turkish column (Lean, 1962). The script features a fascinating juxtaposition of personality, in which the morally and emotionally unmoored Lawrence symbolically trades places with Sharif Ali, who shot down Lawrence's guide in the film's beginning, but who comes to exhibit a nascent humanity. It is a clever script device written in to illustrate the slow and painful disintegration of Lawrence's psyche and the erosion of his integrity.

The vibrant photography of the film's earlier scenes, many of which portray the desert in its most beautiful state, degrade later into chaos and violence as Lawrence is caught up in the political power play nurtured by Dryden and General Allenby. They parlay Lawrence's spectacular military successes, the bonds he forged with the Arab tribal leaders and the power his manufactured persona conferred on the situation, namely, political leverage the English could use against Prince Feisal and the incipient Arab League. However, in a twist of irony typical of the film's narrative subtlety, Feisal also uses Lawrence to his political ends. In one of the film's final scenes, Feisal shows Allenby newspaper headlines trumpeting Arab gains and showing Lawrence in traditional Arab dress (Lean, 1962).

The script is a masterwork of understatement and irony. Lawrence's counter-argument to the maxim "it is written" recurs throughout the film (Lean, 1962). In the first half, Lawrence risks death by going back into the Nafud desert to rescue a man left behind, having passed out and fallen off his camel. Lawrence heroically emerges from the hazy distance with the stricken man on the back of his camel, in so doing winning the permanent respect of his Arab compatriots. Lawrence tells Ali that "nothing is written. However, as the growing Arab army prepares to attack the Jordanian port of Aqaba, a tribal dispute ends in murder, and Lawrence must execute the killer in order to maintain order and his army's integrity. Lawrence is shocked to find that the man he must execute is none other than Gasim, the man he rescued from the desert. In a comment dripping with irony, Anthony Quinn as Auda notes, "It was written then. Better to have left him" (in the desert) (Lean, 1962).

In this way the script reflects how fate is slowly moving against Lawrence, despite his initial successes which, though they earn him prestige and fame, entrap him in a role that Lawrence cannot truly fill, and set expectations that he can never meet. This is the course that the film's narrative arc traces, from the vigorous, almost ecstatic achievements of the first half to the ominous setbacks of the second half, during which Lawrence pays an ever-higher price to his fate. Indeed, things begin to go wrong and the momentum of Aqaba and the search-and-destroy campaign against the Turks give way is warped and obscured by manifestations of Lawrence's fragile psyche.

One of the film's great sub-plots is Lawrence's struggle with, and for,

identity. In one scene he is the wild-eyed romantic, leading the united desert tribes, in another scene he tries to be a dutiful and loyal British army staff officer. His dilemma is that he can never quite manage to be either, only parts of one or the other. Lacking a solid identity, Lawrence struggles against himself, an inner turmoil which Peter O'Toole conveys admirably and without excessive dialogue. Much of the language in the film is sparse, even laconic, and the photography, shot composition and direction combine to carry the action and communicate message. Perhaps the most explicit and powerful example of nuance and expression is the scene in which Lawrence is captured and brought before the Turkish bey, played by Jose Ferrer. The screen is overwhelmed by close-ups of Lawrence's widened eyes, and the bey's moist lips. It is a charged scene in which homosexual overtones resolve in an outburst of masochistic violence, and Lawrence is whipped and tortured. (There is a hint of rape, which T. E. Lawrence claims actually did happen, though this has never been confirmed.)

Lean punctuates the story's flow with many such overt hints at Lawrence's psychological complexity, and how this is perceived by those around him. In the desert raid scene, Lawrence parades for Jackson Bentley's camera atop the train that the Arabs have just destroyed and looted (Lean, 1962). As he does so, the film's theme plays loudly and wildly, imparting a perverse feel and leaving the impression that the relationship between Lawrence and his Arab followers has taken a wrong turn into sycophancy. Lawrence, who feigns modesty, clearly enjoys the attention when the Arabs begin chanting his name, and he pauses dramatically with a pistol raised high in the air. One is drawn back to a scene earlier in the film, when, after

Lawrence and Feraj emerge from the Sinai, a lone motorcyclist on the other side of the Suez canal yells across, " Who are you?!" The viewer is left to ponder that question in a much larger context as the camera slowly closes in on Lawrence's weathered face (Lean, 1962).

The genius of *Lawrence of Arabia*, and of David Lean's unique artistic vision, lie in a fusion of the classic Hollywood narrative, which " is set in a sequence that imparts a clear sense of purpose," with dramatic irony in the form of Lawrence's surprising, and sometimes disturbing, turns of character (Prince, 230-231). One moment it feels as though the viewer is watching a sweeping adventure spectacle on par with the most grandiose Hollywood production. The next moment the narrative turns to the protagonist's personality and shortcomings, which offer a brooding yet fascinating glimpse inside the brilliant yet tortured mind of a man who was one of the first " invented" celebrity personalities of the modern age, an unwilling hero who was just enough of an exhibitionist to be tempted into the limelight.

It is in this manner that *Lawrence of Arabia* engages so intimately with the viewer. In this sense, the film's true meaning lies with the audience, which engages in a kind of dialogue with the film's mise-en-scene and narrative structure (Prince, 232). Some may leave feeling that Lawrence was a heroic figure caught in a cynical political power squeeze between contending ideologies and geo-political priorities. Others may receive the impression that Lawrence was a remarkable but deeply disturbed character whose idiosyncrasies proved his undoing. Still others may simply see a compelling adventure story told within the context of the flawed hero. All of these interpretations are perfectly valid given Lean's brilliantly devised narrative

model.

Thus, a discerning observer of film may identify the effects of the Hollywood blockbuster in terms of form. Lean saw in the outsized adventure story a limitless canopy against which to paint his masterpiece. The light and space of Arabia, the exotic locations and the irresistible lure of adventure provide wonderful counterpoints for Lean's brilliant impositions of dramatic irony (Prince, 232). Elements of this approach can be seen in Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, in which one an ironic story line plays out amid a vast, primal landscape. Lean was a master of this technique, which few directors have ever been able to use in quite the same way. There are elements of black humor in Lean's storytelling, a kind of post-modern existential desperation, and fascination with the dialectical ambiguities of meaning.

For instance, one may well ask whether or not Lawrence was a hero? If so, can a hero every really be perverse and heroic at the same time? In the end, is there really such a thing as a hero, or do extraordinary personalities simply act out the dictates of their own motivations and compulsions?

Lawrence of Arabia forces these questions into the story, as though the film is saying it is not enough to simply follow the adventure of the Arab revolt in the desert, or of an English scholar turned mercenary adventurer. There are too many depths to plumb for that. In *Lawrence of Arabia*, film, like life, is too complex to be taken at face level.

Works Cited

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