



Casablanca and Sive

Theme

# How is the theme introduced?

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- As in Sive, the theme in Casablanca is introduced early on.
- The map and the music suggest oppression, conquest and imperialism.
- The revolving globe and the newsreel create a sense of tension.
- Those in Europe are imprisoned and long to escape by fleeing to Casablanca and from there to Lisbon and ultimately 'The Americas'.
- The lucky few who can make it to America can escape Nazi rule.
- The montage showing the roundup of all the 'suspicious characters' shows us that even in Casablanca, freedom is not guaranteed. There is still a long way to go for those who wish to escape oppression.

- The montage which shows the police rounding up 'the usual suspects' shows how dangerous and unjust life in Casablanca is and gives the impression that this is a difficult place from which to escape.
- A man carrying 'Free France' literature is shot and killed. The camera cuts to the sign reading 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité'. This sign over the Palais de Justice is ironic, just as Marshal Petain's promise on the mural is. There is no freedom, equality or brotherhood in Casablanca. It is merely a holding pen for the dispossessed of Europe.
- The arrival of Major Strasser adds to the impression that Casablanca is a place from which escape will not be easy.
- The principal difference between this and Sive is the fact that the theme in Casablanca is presented as a global issue - huge crowds of people follow the tortuous refugee trail to Casablanca - while in Sive it is a domestic issue. Compared to the fleeing masses, we have one young girl struggling to break free of her aunt's grasp.
- Sive's predicament is not the stuff of newsreels, but it is no less heart-rending and gripping for all of that,



Liberté, égalité, fraternité...

# How is the theme developed?

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- We hear of Victor Laszlo and his successful escape from Nazi custody. He is held up as someone to be admired. Renault is keen that he should not escape again. Rick bets that he will. There is no such note of hope or success in Sive.
- Mena makes it clear that she has not truly escaped the poverty of her upbringing and says she wishes she had waited longer so she could have made a better match for herself.
- Rick and Ilsa's first meeting hints that there is something in Rick's past he wishes to escape. He is angry when he hears 'As Time Goes By'. (Note the first line of the song: 'You must remember this...' Rick does not want to remember.)

- The past cannot be escaped. It catches up with Rick and Ilsa. In Paris, Ilsa tried to escape the past in the form of her life with Laszlo, but he reappeared. Now she thinks she has escaped the torment of her love for Rick, only to meet him again in Casablanca.
- Similarly, in *Sive*, characters are trying to escape the past. Mena wants to flee the poverty of her old life and is willing to do anything to ensure that she never returns to it. Mike is trying to escape the memory of his dead sister and the shame surrounding her death.

# Do we see situations developing that lead to a crisis?

## Does this capture / increase our interest in the theme?

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- In both Casablanca and Sive, we see the central characters' chances of escape seemingly diminish as the plot progresses. Determined and ruthless opponents seem to hold all the power in each case. The principal difference between the texts, however, is that Sive is pitted against a small number of individuals, while Ilsa, Rick and Laszlo have the might of the Nazi regime to contend with.
- In Sive, the net tightens inexorably around the innocent young girl once Mena and Thomasheen have decided on their plan. In Act 1, Scene 3, Mena gets Sive alone and bullies her mercilessly. Like Strasser, she dangles what she believes is an attractive proposition in front of Sive. If she marries Sean Dota, she will be wealthy and will escape poverty. However, both Strasser and Mena lack understanding of people with higher moral values than their own. Sive and Laszlo have no intention of reaching a compromise that would force them to abandon that which they hold dear: love in Sive's case, and the fight for freedom in Laszlo's case. Mena stops pretending to have Sive's best interest at heart once she sees that the girl cannot be bribed into accepting a match with Sean Dota. She reveals her true nature, and tells Sive that she is nothing but a 'bye-chile' and a 'bastard' and that her days of schooling are over now. She is not a child any longer, and cannot share a room with Nanna any more. She flings Sive's schoolbag across the room as she talks, and forces the young girl down into the chair. This is a very tense moment in the play, and we wonder how Sive can possibly escape her plight when she is pitted against such a powerful adversary.
- Similarly, in Casablanca we see Strasser becoming more openly hostile and threatening in his dealings with Ilsa and Laszlo. He delights in telling them that Ugarte is dead, knowing that they were pinning their hopes on getting the letters of transit from him. After the Battle of the Anthems, he confronts Ilsa and tells her that if Laszlo does not agree to his terms, there are only two other alternatives for him: a concentration camp or death. He does not say openly that he will have Laszlo killed, but his comment 'In Casablanca, human life is cheap'. We know that Ugarte was murdered by the authorities, so we take Strasser's threat very seriously indeed.

# Psychological pressure

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- Both Mena and Strasser attempt to threaten and browbeat others into submission. They hope that by doing this they will convince them that escape is impossible, and that their only hope of any future happiness lies in complying with their orders, however distasteful they may be.
- Strasser tries to tempt Laszlo by promising him freedom and comfort if he betrays his fellow resistance fighters. Mena urges Sive to think of the 'handling of thousands' she will have if she marries Sean Dota.
- Strasser is less successful than Mena because Laszlo is a stronger, more confident person. He would never give in to such pressure and is disgusted by Strasser's offer. Sive, on the other hand, is equally repulsed by the offer made to her, but is not strong enough to fight Mena. While Laszlo makes an eloquent and scornful speech about Nazi rule, Sive can do nothing but sit helplessly while Mena forces her to agree.



# Do minor characters contribute to our understanding of the theme?

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- Jan and Annina Brandel, the young Bulgarian couple, show just how difficult it is to escape Nazi rule and leave a place where 'a devil has the people by the throat'. For example, we see them being refused an exit visa just as Ilsa and Laszlo arrive at Renault's office for a meeting with Strasser. This makes us fear that Ilsa and Laszlo may face similar difficulties.
- Renault is trying to pretend he neither needs nor wants to escape anything, but his words hollow as the film progresses. He clearly resents Strasser's imperious manner and, despite claiming that he blows with the prevailing wind, Renault eventually decides to break free of Nazi rule.
- Likewise, in Sive, we see that Thomasheen Sean Rua also wishes to escape his lonely, loveless life. However, unlike the characters in Casablanca, Thomasheen Sean Rua does not garner our sympathy. We don't wish him success, as his only way of escaping his plight is to trap Sive by forcing her to marry the repulsive old farmer, Sean Dota.

- Unlike Sive, we see a large cast of characters in Casablanca, all of whom are desperate to escape. They look with longing at the plane flying overhead, and dream that they might be next.
- Women sell jewellery, men make shady deals to buy exit visas.
- In the confined setting of Sive, we only learn about the outside world through those characters who report what they have seen and heard. It seems that the poor farmers are at last beginning to escape the yoke of poverty. However, there is an implication that, like Mena, Mike and Thomasheen, there is something unwholesome about those who are succeeding in bettering themselves. Pats Bocock points to Sean Dota and says 'The likes of him will be the new lords of the land, God help the land!'
- Conversely, in Casablanca, we are led to believe that those who succeed in escaping their old lives will be living in a place where they are free to disseminate their ideas (Laszlo) and bring up their families in place of peace and plenty (Jan and Annina Brandel)

# Is there a moment of crisis or a turning point in the text?

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- In Sive, the last chance the young girl has of escape is the letter Liam Scuab gives to Pats Bocock to deliver, in which he tells her of his plan to elope with her later that night. The audience is hopeful that this last ditch attempt to rescue Sive may succeed. However, when Nanna gives the letter to Mike and asks him to see that Sive gets it, we are on tenterhooks once more. Will Mike do the right thing?
- Interestingly, in both Casablanca and Sive, the characters' chances of escape hinge on letters. In Casablanca, it is the letters of transit that hold the key to safe passage to Lisbon and from there to America.
- Ilsa, unlike Sive, makes a spirited attempt to procure her freedom, and that of her husband. She goes to Rick's apartment and does everything in her power - including threatening him with a gun - to make him give her the letters of transit.

# Does a central character have to make a difficult decision? Does the character do the right thing?

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- Both Mike and Rick are faced with a dilemma: do they hand over the letters or keep them for selfish reasons?
- Mike fails Sive. He allows Thomasheen to persuade him to read the letter to him, and then stands by while the other man throws it into the fire. As the letter goes up in smoke, so does Sive's last chance of escape.
- Rick, on the other hand, does the right thing. Unlike Mike, who has never recovered from his sister's death after giving birth to an illegitimate child, Rick faces the past and moves on. Ilsa explains the reason she left him in Paris, and Rick's bitterness evaporates. As Ilsa collapses into his arms, begging him to do the thinking for her and for all of them, Rick gazes into the middle distance, and we feel that he is wrestling with an ethical dilemma. He can have the woman he loves, or he can make a noble sacrifice for the greater good.

# How is this decision linked to the theme?

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- Because Mike cannot escape the past, he destroys Sive's chance of future happiness and prevents her escaping a fate she dreads.
- Rick, by facing up to the past and escaping the demons that have haunted him for the past eighteen months, is empowered to help Laszlo and Ilsa escape to America.

# How is the theme resolved?

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- In Sive, there is no happy ending. She does manage to escape the night before the wedding, but not to join Liam Scuab. Poignantly, she leaves by her bedroom window just as Liam had proposed, but instead of running to him, she runs to her death.
- With Sive's death, Mike and Mena's hopes of escape also die. Mena will not get her money and will not escape the threat of poverty. Mike, we can be sure, will be far more haunted by his niece's death than he was by his sister's, as he has been partly responsible for Sive's tragic end.
- In Casablanca, on the other hand, there is a positive and uplifting end to the text. Laszlo and Ilsa escape the Nazi's clutches and fly to America, Rick escapes the painful memories that have tormented him, and even Capt. Renault escapes the German yoke.

# Have we learned anything about human behaviour or society in general from the exploration of the theme?

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- The presentation of the theme in both texts is very different. In *Sive*, we are left with the feeling that any attempt to escape is futile. We are led to believe that selfishness and greed are stronger than love and decency.
- In Casablanca, the ending leaves us with a feeling of optimism. We believe that, when push comes to shove, people's better feelings will prevail and they will do what they can to help their fellow man escape his plight.

# Does the author's use of setting, imagery, motifs, lighting, costumes, music or special effects add to your understanding of the theme?

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- The beacon on the airport tower is reminiscent of a searchlight in a prison or a concentration camp, and reminds us that everyone in Casablanca is being watched.
- The music is dark and ominous at times when escape seems impossible. However, a note of hope is struck by the occasional chords of the Marseillaise. The Cross of Lorraine appears as a symbol of Free France a number of times. This reminds us that there are plenty of people resisting the Nazi oppression.
- The Nazis are always in uniform, and usually in groups. Strasser is the exception, but he is intimidating simply because of who he is. The Germans march into Rick's bar almost in formation, in a way that is reminiscent of soldiers marching to war.
- Renault's men hide in the shadows, trailing Laszlo and watching his every move.
- Renault himself is intimidating when he represents Vichy France and is allied with Strasser. At one stage, his shadow looms large on the wall behind Ilsa and Laszlo, just before he arrives at their table. This reminds us that, for all his suavity and charm, he represents a serious threat to Ilsa and Laszlo's hope of escape.
- Renault knows exactly where Laszlo is at all times. He is able to tell Rick and Strasser exactly where Laszlo is when they ask.
- This all adds to the impression that escape from Casablanca will be nigh impossible.
- Similarly, in Sive, Mena ensures that the girl is under her watchful eye at all times. She systematically and ruthlessly cuts off all avenues of escape. Sive is forbidden to go to school any more, and she is forbidden to share a room with Nanna any more.