

APPENDIX

Writing a Film Analysis

Films are made to be seen and heard, to appeal to our visual and aural senses. Like any art form, however, films are also meant to be felt and understood, to appeal to our emotions and minds. One of the best ways to determine whether a film has succeeded in any or all of these goals is to analyze the elements that make up the whole work.

To write an analysis of a film, you must study the film carefully. Your critical analysis should be derived from your personal encounter with the film, not from published criticism. Access to a videocassette recorder or DVD player is essential if you are going to perform a critical analysis of any depth. It is not enough to like or dislike the movie; you must determine why it succeeds or fails in reaching out and encompassing the viewer.

The first step is to view the film in its entirety. From this viewing you can get an initial reaction to the many parts of the film that you will have to explore in more depth. When you first view the film, it is best not to try to take notes or separate the parts of the film; you should be familiar with the textbook in order to know what to look for. After you have formulated a thesis and have begun the process of supporting that thesis, you should view the film at least once more in its entirety and two or three times in segments in order to review scenes of major importance.

The thesis statement is the element around which to structure your analysis. Because the theme or focus of the film is basically the thesis of the filmmaker, identification of that theme can often serve as the thesis of the film analysis itself. You can then view the remainder of the film's elements in light of their success or failure to support the film's central focus.

After determining the thesis, you should view the film again with an eye to noting particular elements used by the filmmaker. At this point you can take a more critical and in-depth look at story, dramatic structure, symbolism, characterization, conflict, and other fictional or dramatic elements. It is important to describe in detail scenes or portions of the film where these elements are used and to discuss their contribution to the film's overall success or failure.

Most of the above-mentioned steps are crucial to any literary analysis. The next elements to be considered are peculiar to the film medium. In essence, they are the visual and aural elements that form the basic means of communication in a film. The artistic use of the visual and aural qualities and properties of the film medium determines the effectiveness of a motion picture. Although it is impossible to look at every visual and aural element employed in a film, the use of a VCR or laserdisc or DVD player will enable you to pinpoint and examine the filmmaker's use of camera angles and camera movement, focus, framing,

lighting, setting, editing, point of view, special effects, dialogue, and music. After exploring these major cinematic elements and describing specific examples of their use, it is necessary to relate all of these examples and elements to the thesis of your analysis. At this point, the use of smooth and clear transitions is vital to the paper's success.

Though basically objective, a critical analysis should include your personal reactions to the film and explain your reasons for liking or disliking it. Even if the film does not meet your expectations, your analysis should explain how successful the film was in reaching its own level of ambition and in achieving its aims. After completing the film analysis, you probably will not change your immediate reaction to the film. But you are likely to have a better understanding and appreciation of that reaction and the effects of the film on viewers in general.

Sample Student Paper: Analysis of a Complete Film

The paper that follows is an example of a critical analysis of an entire film, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Numbers printed in the margins indicate pages of the textbook that serve as the basis for specific paragraphs of the paper. Once again, note the importance of personal and independent analysis. The author of this paper read the textbook and viewed the film several times but did not rely on published criticism for the ideas and opinions that she expresses.

John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*

—LISA CORNWELL

20–34 Throughout its relatively young life, the motion picture industry has produced an enormous number and variety of films that have ranged from glaring examples of artistic ineptitude to hallmarks of cinematic excellence. Although many of these films have proven memorable for both good and bad reasons, only a few have come to be regarded as true “classics.” The films in this category for the most part are centered on a universal and timeless concern that in turn helps those films achieve the enduring excellence that qualifies them as classics. One such film is *The Grapes of Wrath*, directed by John Ford and based on the novel by John Steinbeck.

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20–34 *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of a family uprooted by the combined forces of nature and mechanization and forced into a struggle for survival. Although it is set during the Depression of the 1930s, the film does more than describe the plight of Oklahoma farmers. Director John Ford uses the existing social problem as a background for the development of the film's major themes: familial survival and the related struggle for human dignity, especially for the common man or the “have nots” of society. To a lesser degree, Ford also stresses man's affinity for the land and the need for a communal consciousness among society's underdogs, but those are mainly subthemes used to help support the film's central focus on the family and its survival.

20–34 Throughout the film, that focus is constantly reiterated. When Tom tells Ma of his growing anger against the system, Ma replies, “You gotta keep clear, the family's breaking up. You gotta keep clear.” And again, when Tom kills the man who murdered Casey, Ma begs him to stay and help keep the family together. She tells Tom, “They was a time when

we was on the lan'. They was a boundary to us then . . . we was the family, kinda whole and clear. An' now we ain't clear no more."

Ford's success in conveying his themes in *The Grapes of Wrath* is greatly aided by his mastery of fictional and dramatic elements, and one of the most important of these is a unified and believable story. Ford and screenwriter Nunnally Johnson manage to transport the Joads from Oklahoma to California using a continuous line of action, with each scene leading logically and inescapably to Tom's growing sense of discontent and resolve and the family's eventual strengthening through adversity. Even though the film ends on an optimistic and perhaps overly sentimental note, *The Grapes of Wrath* presents a realistic and believable portrayal of a migrant family. According to the film, there are no easy solutions to the problems faced by the Joads, and indeed, the viewer receives the impression that there may be no solution except acceptance and the determination to survive. **40-52**

Another facet of the story that adds to its believability is the understated handling of the emotional material. The relationships of the individual family members, the death scenes, Connie's desertion of the family, Rose of Sharon's increasing melancholia, and other potentially emotional scenes are played down to a point where they become more indicative of the family's growing acceptance of sorrow as just a part of their everyday lives. There is very little demonstrative affection shown even between Ma and Tom, and Ma makes the statement at the end that "we ain't the kissin' kind." That statement, made as she and Tom say goodbye to one another and briefly kiss, has much more emotional impact than it would have if they wildly clung to one another. **49-52**

The success of the film's story also owes much to a strong dramatic structure. Using a chronological beginning with Tom's return home and the resulting introduction of the main characters and the problems they face, *The Grapes of Wrath* moves with a growing intensity toward the climax. The film's major conflict between the "haves" and the "have nots" is introduced in the opening minutes of the film as Tom asks the truck driver for a lift. When the truck driver points out the "No Riders" sticker on the window, Tom's answer reveals his view of society's class conflicts when he replies: "Yeah, but a good guy don't pay no attention to what some heel makes him stick on his truck." Conflict builds as the characters, particularly Tom and Casey, see more and more of the injustices around them. When their passion and the forces surrounding them finally collide in the fight scene, that climax leads naturally to the dénouement and Tom's decision to leave. A flashback near the beginning of the film also furthers the dramatic structure as Muley recalls with painful intensity how the big "cats" invaded his farm. This scene effectively foreshadows the pain and struggle in store for the Joads as the film progresses. **51-54**

Symbolism is another tool used by Ford to add to the dramatic structure. Much of that symbolism is religious in nature and revolves around the failed preacher, Jim Casey. Beginning with his initials, continuing with his described wandering in search of truth, and ending with the final sacrifice of his life, the film more than hints at Casey as a Christ-like figure. He even tells his persecutors just moments before they kill him that they don't know what they are doing. More religious symbolism can be seen at the opening of the film when the small, lone figure of Tom Joad is shown walking toward a crossroads and later when he becomes a disciple and convert to Casey's philosophy of life. **55-57**

Another strong symbolic image centers upon Ford's use of hands grasping for soil. The symbol recurs throughout the movie. In one scene, Muley squats down to pick up a handful of dirt and utters his plaintive cry that the land belongs to the ones who were born, lived, and died on it. In another scene at John's farm, Grandpa grasps a handful of soil as he also **69-79**

reaffirms his dedication to the land he is losing. “This is my dirt,” he says. “It’s no good, but it’s mine, all mine.” Perhaps the most effective use of this symbol occurs as Grandpa is dying. His last action is to grasp a handful of dirt in a final attempt to hold onto his “land.” All of this symbolism serves to re-emphasize the thematic qualities of courage and determination in the face of loss and despair by illustrating the characters’ unwillingness to give up the only possession they feel they have left.

57–69 As with its use of symbolism, *The Grapes of Wrath* utilizes characterization to communicate some of the major truths of the film. And, in fact, the characterization truly makes the film come alive in many respects. Jane Darwell’s Ma Joad was a brilliant portrayal of a woman who, while already a strong figure, develops into the sole anchor and strength of her family. Darwell’s size and plain but expressive features helped her portrayal significantly, but Ma Joad really came alive on screen through a combination of Darwell’s acting skills and the marvelous dialogue she had to work with in the majority of her scenes.

57–69 Examples of the artistry of the Ma Joad characterization abound in the film. At the start of the film, we see a tired and almost beaten woman burn her mementos and refuse to look back at the home she is forced to leave. But as the story progresses, Ma gradually makes more and more of the decisions as Pa gradually relinquishes his role as head of the family. Ma herself recognizes this fact when she tells Tom, “Your Pa’s lost his place. He ain’t the head no more.” The often poor grammar and vocabulary used by the character make her seem more believable as an uneducated farm wife, but what she says and the power with which she says it reveal the true nature of her strong and noble character. Even small traits, such as the care with which she puts her hat on before she goes outside into the dirt and squalor, reveal her resolve not to let circumstances break down the last vestiges of the traditions she clings to so desperately.

57–69 Tom Joad, the other main character in *The Grapes of Wrath*, also shows development throughout the film. Starting as a somewhat hardened ex-convict who just wants to be left alone to tend to himself and his family, Henry Fonda’s Tom comes to the conclusion that “a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul.” Ford develops Tom from a rather calm and controlled man with a chip on his shoulder to a man whose inner rage finally results in his taking action to try and change the injustices he can no longer tolerate.

57–69 That penchant for violence is carefully developed through what becomes a leitmotif for Tom—his punctuating of strong statements with exclamation marks of “violent action.”

306–310 That violent undercurrent and the tension within Tom are constantly present as Fonda tenses his jaw muscles as though trying to control his inner rebellion. It finally erupts in scenes such as the one where he slams the door of the truck and tells the driver he was imprisoned for homicide. Another instance where he can no longer control his anger occurs when he smashes a whiskey bottle against a rock after telling Casey he “killed a guy in a dance hall.” Finally, his anger in response to Casey’s death explodes with his killing of Casey’s murderer. By the end of the film, the preceding events have made him see that the only chance for the common folk is to work together to try and right things for everyone. As in the case of Darwell, Fonda was an excellent choice for the role he played. His tall, lanky build and his slow-moving, slow-talking manner, which seemed to mask an inner fire, makes Tom Joad come alive on the screen.

315–316 All of the characters were excellently cast and portrayed flawlessly down to the smallest bit part. Perhaps the most effective supporting player emerged with John Qualen’s excellent

59–66 portrayal of Muley Graves. In a classic example of name typing, Ford managed to use the name Muley to help convey the character’s stubborn refusal to give up his land. Using

Graves as the last name reinforced the “graveyard ghost” image of the character. Qualen’s large, staring eyes and almost manic expressions added to the characterization of Muley as a dramatic foil to the Joads. Unlike the Joads, with their stoic acceptance of change and resolve to deal with it, Muley comes across as a man unable to deal with the realities of his situation. He is virtually destroyed by change.

The individual characters are interesting in themselves, but the conflicts involving them and revolving around them are what make the characters of importance to the viewer. The constant striving to maintain human dignity and family values against a system and against circumstances that seem bent on destroying those qualities is what gives *The Grapes of Wrath* its drama and power. That conflict and its implied resolution for each of the main characters is the very essence of the film itself. Each character’s individual battle against the hardship and injustices foisted upon the family and the joint effort to survive as a family unit brings the viewer a sense of kinship with the people on the screen. The very fact that not all of the characters survive the conflict just adds to the film’s realism. Without the Joads’ constant battle to survive amid the forces of nature and society, *The Grapes of Wrath* would not have emerged as the classic it is but would have joined countless unimportant films that have not survived the test of time. **55–57**

In considering time, it is also necessary to view the setting for *The Grapes of Wrath*. The time period in which the story takes place is obviously crucial to the theme and message of the film. Set in a time when countless numbers of people were out of work and faced with poverty and a loss of hope, *The Grapes of Wrath* explores a universal problem even though its focus is mainly on the plight of one family. The social structures and economic factors at work during the Depression of the 1930s led to a lot of questioning on the part of society itself, and individuals with ideas of social reform similar to the views held by Casey and Tom were making themselves heard by a larger number of citizens than ever before in society. The contrasting attitudes evinced by the camp guards and establishment figures in the film are also indicative of the times and add even more realism to the film. **100–108**

With land and the loss of land an integral part of the story, the physical location of *The Grapes of Wrath* also proves important to the film’s overall message. The rural roots of the Joads in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl region were obviously important in shaping their values and character. Although Ford relies mostly on dialogue and Muley Graves’s narration of events to illustrate the ravaging of the Oklahoma farmland, the Joads’ small, bleak farmhouse and the old, dilapidated truck adequately convey the poverty of their environment. In later scenes, as the Joads travel west, the setting of the camps also contributes to the realization of what they are up against in their struggle. The dirt and shabbiness of the first camps parallel one of the lowest points in the family’s journey, and the clean and well-run government camp proves a better setting for the new sense of optimism emerging at the end of the film. **100–108**

Ford has been criticized for setting so much of the film indoors and on studio sets rather than in a more visually appealing and realistic outdoor background; but his use of tents, small rooms, and the cab of the Joads’ truck helps define the trapped and confined atmosphere of the Joads’ world at that time. The sometimes artificial settings also help define the Joads as being more important than their surroundings. **100–108**

One other dramatic element worth noting in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the use of irony. Throughout much of the film, the Joads continually refer to California as the land of milk and honey, a place where they will be able to regain much of what has been taken from them. As the story progresses, however, the viewer sees that the Joads are in for a rude awakening. Part of the family is lost on the way; their first view of the land shows a dusty, barren **98–100**

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desert as bleak as the land they left; and the jobs they thought would be in plentiful supply are few and far between. Indeed, the “grapes” that Grandpa wanted so badly have turned into a harvest of injustice, poverty and unrest—truly “grapes of wrath.”

123–124 Irony and all of the other dramatic and fictional elements utilized by Ford in the production of his film classic are made even more effective by their combination with the visual elements that are essential to the film medium. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ford manages to keep a continuous flow of starkly dramatic and powerful images before the viewer, using a very tight and controlled cinematic composition. As mentioned previously in the discussion of setting, Ford placed most of the film’s scenes in limited spaces. There are very few long shots in the film. A long shot of Tom at the film’s beginning as he walks toward the crossroads is followed for the most part by scenes that are either tightly framed, set in small, cramped areas, or shot so that darkness cuts off the outer edges of the visual image. Even the long shot of Casey and Tom walking toward the Joad farm and the one of Tom walking up the hill at the end have a closed feeling to them. The contrast between the dark, solid ground against the “wall” of sky once again adds a studiolike look to the scenery and prevents the viewer from perceiving any sense of spaciousness or freedom.

131–135 Unlike the typical modern film, *The Grapes of Wrath* purposely avoids movement and physical action. Most of the dialogue is delivered by relatively still figures in an atmosphere of oppressive silence. This static composition focuses our attention on the most dramatic points in the film: tableau images of the characters, who are seemingly frozen by their inability to understand or cope with the events that are turning their lives upside-down. Ford seems to be trying to focus the viewer’s attention on the family members and their personal reactions to the problems surrounding them rather than on the problems themselves. The only real sense of movement in the film is imparted through its montage sequences where the Joads do momentarily become more a part of the overall surroundings. The montage shots are used to portray the passage of time as the Joads travel across the country. Road signs and glimpses of long lines of vehicles trailing down the road do give the viewer a sense of the Joads as part of a larger world. Another montage showing the big “cats” ripping up farmland compresses the torturous destruction of the farmers’ lives into a brief but effective shot.

180–190 The constant background droning of the heavy engines and the superimposed low-angle image of the treads almost make viewers feel that they are being run over by the massive, devouring machines, which keep coming rapidly one after the other. This scene also symbolizes the Okies’ helplessness to halt the “progress” that threatens to annihilate them.

148–151 For the most part, however, the editing of the film is geared toward emphasizing the family unit and not the social and physical environment. Slow fade-ins and fade-outs provide smooth visual transitions, adding to the overall mood and highlighting the dramatic tensions within the separate scenes. There is an uncharacteristically jarring note resulting from the editing of the film. Noah, the brother who begins the journey with the rest of the family, just disappears somewhere along the way with no mention made of what happened to him. Readers of Steinbeck’s novel know that Noah is retarded, and although this condition is clearly shown in the film, it is sometimes missed by viewers. In the novel, Noah believes himself to be a burden to his family and simply walks off after the bathing scene, never to return. This scene did not appear in the finished film.

167–175 On the whole, however, Ford utilized excellent cinematic compression to avoid filming unnecessary scenes from the book. In Grandpa’s burial scene, the camera moves in for a close-up shot of Tom adding an “s” to the word “funeral” in the letter he has written. With the simple addition of this letter, Ford manages to foreshadow Grandma’s death and imply

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that she also will receive the standard burial. Thus, he does not have to use additional film time to show the burial.

Another very important visual element that adds to the dramatic effect of *The Grapes of Wrath* is the lighting. The majority of scenes in the film take place at night or in very low-key lighting and fit in naturally with the dark and bleak future that seems to be awaiting the Joads. Casey and Tom meet at dusk; Muley's story is told in a darkened house lit only by a candle; most of the Joads' departures occur at night; the Keene ranch scenes take place mostly in the cabin, where low-key lighting provides a dim setting; and the fight scene is played out not only in the dark but amid the mist and fog hovering over the dark water. Tom and Ma's parting also is a night scene, but from there the film moves into sunlight as an accompaniment to the Joads' more optimistic departure from the government camp. **112–117**

The contrast in lighting within individual scenes also creates some vivid effects. Most of the light that does exist in the various scenes comes from candles, lanterns, or flashlights and results in the characters' faces taking on an unreal quality. The scene with Muley in the Joads' deserted farmhouse is especially illustrative of Ford's mastery of low-key lighting. As Tom and Casey enter the deserted house, they and the viewer are met with a complete darkness that is broken only when Muley suddenly appears like a ghost, eerily illuminated in the flickering light of a candle. The viewer, along with Tom and Casey, senses the mysteriousness of the scene and wonders about the fate of the Joads. Muley even refers to himself as an "ol' graveyard ghost," and indeed, that is what he resembles in the dark and deserted farmhouse. The characters' pale faces and darkly expressive eyes give an added emphasis to their dialogue. Casey's final speech to Tom in the tent prior to his death is made with the light from a coal-oil lamp illuminating his face, and once again his Christ-like resemblance is emphasized. The low-key lighting here and throughout the film provides an intensity to the characters and scenes that would not exist in brightly lit conditions. Even in the few instances of high-key lighting included in *The Grapes of Wrath*, shadows are employed to add a dark overtone to the overall mood. When Muley squats in the dust following the destruction of his home, his shadow is diminished into a flat, one-dimensional figure, and we are made to see that Muley has become only the empty shell of a man. The high-angle camera shot also serves to diminish his importance. **112–117**
167–175

One other visually effective tool employed by Ford in *The Grapes of Wrath* is his use of reflection to increase the dramatic depth of a scene. Ma's sad look back at her youth and happiness when she goes through her mementos is made even more dramatic when she holds up the dangling earrings and observes herself in a dusty mirror. For a moment, in the dust and gloom, the lines and wrinkles imposed by age and suffering are softened, and we can almost picture a younger and happier woman. The other highly effective use of reflection occurs in the scene of Pa, Tom, and Al in the cab of the truck. The cramped, tightly framed night scene acquires an added layer of depth when we see the panoramic desert scene unfolding before their ghostlike faces reflected on the dusty windshield. **147–148**

Ford's composition throughout the film creates a very objective point of view. The viewer more or less observes the film through a "window" with an almost stage-like quality imparted to the scenes viewed through the camera's eye. This in turn makes the viewer extremely conscious of the dramatic aspects of the film. There is really only one point in the film where Ford employs a sustained subjective point of view. As the Joads drive into the first camp, we see the camp through their eyes as though we were in the truck with them. Ford seems to be trying to make the viewer share the Joads' first jarring realization that their future may not be as promising as they had been led to believe. For a brief, uncomfortable **124–131**

moment, we “become” the Joads and feel like unwanted newcomers entering a hostile twilight zone of poverty and despair. The eyes of the camp residents are not only on the Joads; they are also viewing us with suspicion and hostility. On the whole, however, the scenes of *The Grapes of Wrath* are viewed as one might view a stage play, and once again we are made to focus on the Joads as opposed to the ongoing action around them.

258–260 Although point of view and visual elements are essential parts of any cinematic film, the use of sound can greatly enhance the dramatic message. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is often the silence or absence of sound that provides the emotional intensity emanating from the film. As mentioned earlier, most of the dialogue is delivered in an otherwise silent setting. This makes the viewer concentrate on each word and every nuance of meaning. In the scene where the Joads enter the first camp and see the dirt and despair around them, the silence broken only by the barking of stray dogs further increases the oppressiveness of the camp.

253–254 The lonely sound of howling wind is also used effectively to punctuate the dramatic movement within the film. Ford uses the sound at appropriate moments such as the scene where Muley tells why the Joads have to move. The sound of the duster and the visual signs of a blowing wind serve as narrative transitions between the present and the past as Muley relates his story. The wind also comes up to howl and blow debris around the farmyard as the Joads leave Uncle John’s house. This gives an even more deserted look and feel to the abandoned farm.

267–278 Another aspect of the film related to sound is the use of music as a background for the unfolding events. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the background music is limited like the rest of the sound. In fact, the dominant theme music heard throughout the film is the folk song “Red River Valley.” The haunting refrains of this song are used sparingly to highlight the major emotional scenes such as the one of Ma reviewing her life’s souvenirs and the final goodbye between Ma and Tom. It is also used to convey deep sadness as the Joads pull away from the abandoned farm. A flapping door is the only other accompaniment as papers and dust swirl around the abandoned farmhouse, increasing the sense of desertion and the ending of one phase of the Joads’ lives. As the truck turns onto the main highway heading west, the music changes instantly into an optimistic and heroic hymn of hope. “Red River Valley” is also employed effectively at the dance, this time with words: When Tom starts singing the lines of the song while dancing with Ma, we see the frightened and sad look on her face as she listens to the part of the song signifying farewell. As Tom sings, “Come and sit by my side if you love me. Do not hasten to bid me adieu,” we see the expression on Ma’s face change from one of happiness to one of worry and fear. Ford uses this to foreshadow the final parting of Ma and Tom. The lyrics “Just remember the Red River Valley and the boy that has loved you so true” add to that foreshadowing and also re-emphasize the Okies’ departure from Oklahoma (the Red River Valley). The song that Connie plays and sings on the store porch at one of the camps, “Goin’ Down the Road Feelin’ Bad,” summarizes his feelings about the journey west and foreshadows his subsequent desertion of the family.

334–338 Throughout the previous discussion of sound, visual elements, and dramatic and fictional elements, it has been clear that this film was strongly influenced by the director’s style. A director who believed in the simplicity of visual statement, Ford was sparing in his use of camera movement, dialogue, and background sound, and this style is clearly evident in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ford was also known as a director who shared an empathy with the common people but also imposed a rather strict and traditional moral code on their actions.

He believed in an adherence to traditional values, and the Joads' fight to maintain their values fits in concisely with that style.

Ford's intention with *The Grapes of Wrath* was to film a strong, compelling story of a family's struggle to survive and to maintain a level of human dignity, and in this he succeeded. All of the elements described in the earlier part of this analysis were used to further Ford's sense of what his film was meant to communicate. At times Ford and the film itself have been criticized for not following the aims of the original novel. Critics have said that the socialistic themes of the book and the implied suggestion of the common people banding together to combat the forces of established power and authority were lost in Ford's cinematic version of the Joad saga, and, in a very real sense, those critics are correct. Ford subordinated concern for the family of man to concern for one man's family. At the same time, however, he projected a sense of universality. The Joads may not have meshed as much as they might have with the surrounding families, but they served as a sharply delineated representation of an individual family's response to the forces around it. And in many ways, this imparted a sense of realism to the film. Most families, when their very existence is threatened, are much more concerned with their individual survival than they are with the survival of society as a whole. This viewpoint is clearly conveyed several times during the film. When Joe Davis's boy comes to bulldoze Muley's farm and is asked why he is doing this, he replies, ". . . for three dollars a day. That's what I'm doing it for. My wife and my three kids and my wife's mother got to eat." This same idea is repeated in the dialogue between Casey and Tom. When Casey wants Tom and the others to join the strike, Tom says, "I know what Pa'd say. We ate tonight. Not good, but we ate, and that's all Pa cares about." Even when Tom comes to share some of Casey's conclusions that "A fella ain't got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul," he still implies that his concern is with making life better for his family by finding out what's wrong and trying to do something about it. He also voices the concern that if he stays, he will endanger the family he and Ma have been trying to save.

After an analysis of all of these various elements, I can truly say that I found *The Grapes of Wrath* a strong and compelling film that more than deserves its reputation as a "classic." Ford's artistry in conveying his film's message through the use of clear and precise visual images and understated yet deep emotional content made the film reach out to me as a viewer. The perfect casting of such superb actors as Henry Fonda, Jane Darwell, and John Carradine added to the film's believability, as did Nunnally Johnson's well-structured screenplay and Gregg Toland's expressive photography. The parts of the film that perhaps can be termed as overly sentimental and optimistic somehow seemed to fit in with the overall theme. Even Ma's final speech ("They can't wipe us out. They can't lick us. We'll go on forever, Pa, 'cause we're the people.") has an honest ring to it despite the sentimental overtones.

Although *The Grapes of Wrath* may not have been a completely realistic look at the plight of migrant workers from the nation's Dust Bowl, it wasn't meant to be a documentary. It succeeded as it was meant to succeed, as a haunting and evocative image of a specific era of American history and of the type of people that lived through it and endured.

Sample Student Paper: Analysis of Selected Film Elements

Instead of analyzing a whole film, you may be asked to write a brief paper focusing on the four or five elements you consider crucial to the film's overall impact. This kind of paper

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can be limited to four or five typed pages and can be designed to fit a simple but very workable organizational pattern. The marginal notes in the sample below describe how the paper is structured. The numbers in the margin indicate pages in the textbook used as a basis for the paper.

Assignment

1. Study the assigned film by watching it several times on a VCR or DVD player, focusing on answering the questions on the basic approach to analysis of the whole film on pages 388–389.
2. After watching the film, choose four or five elements that contribute significantly to the film's overall effect, and analyze in some detail the contributions of each. Use technical terms and concepts discussed in the text when they are pertinent to your analysis.
3. Use your analyses of the individual film elements as the body of your paper; then add an introductory paragraph, transitions, and a conclusion to shape the paper into a complete essay. The sample paper on *Taxi Driver* demonstrates how one student handled the assignment.

Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*

—KIRA CAROLLO

- 20–34** *The introductory paragraph accomplishes three goals:*
1. *It provides necessary information on the film, in this case by placing it in historical context. The introduction could instead provide other kinds of information, such as awards won by the film, critical and popular response, or its relationship to other films by the same director. Any background information provided here should be both general and brief.*
 2. *It identifies the elements to be analyzed in the body of the paper; and it attempts to relate each element to theme.*
 3. *It attempts to state, as clearly as possible, the film's theme or central concern.*
- 57–69** *In the first sentence of the body of the paper, the writer informs us of the subject of the first section (characterization) and names the various aspects to be discussed*

Martin Scorsese's powerful film *Taxi Driver* is one that delves into serious moral, social, and political issues of its time, issues that are still highly relevant today. Made in 1976, it surfaced at a time in American history during which there was much social and political unrest. Our country was divided on many issues of the day—the aftermath of the Vietnam War, political chaos resulting from our growing distrust of the government after the Watergate scandal, and increasing crime rates in our cities. Because many veterans returning from combat duty in Vietnam had serious difficulties coping with “normal” life, Paul Schrader's script for *Taxi Driver* embodies our nation's frustration, rage, and confusion in the character of Travis Bickle, a troubled young ex-marine. The film succeeds for a number of reasons. Robert De Niro's excellent portrayal of Travis gives the character meaning and significance in several ways. Scorsese's use of voice-over narration in the film is an element which adds impact to Bickle's struggle to make sense of his world. The use of ambient sound, music, and powerful visual elements is also instrumental in conveying the film's theme: one man's lonely struggle for some form of identity and human dignity, as well as some understanding of his place in the world as an individual.

One of the most important elements in *Taxi Driver* is the characterization of the title character, achieved through name typing, dialogue, and appearance. The names of characters in film are usually carefully chosen, often to suggest some important qualities of the character himself. Travis Bickle is a name that is easily re-

membered—it seems to stick in the viewer’s mind. The name “Bickle” is simple and direct; “Travis” has a more melodic flow. The two together seem to fit the character’s contradiction. He is methodical and steady as suggested by the fluent name. Yet he can also be direct and harsh, as evident in the abrupt name “Bickle.” The nature of his dialogue also gives the viewer insight into Bickle’s character—not only what is said, but how it is said. His frequent use of “rough” language, his lapse into poor grammar, his name-calling and stereotyping of the people in the streets, and his violent thought processes reveal much about his social, economic, and educational background. Travis’s appearance adds even more clues to his character. He continually wears a dirty army jacket (collar turned up), his hair is greasy and ungroomed, and he always has a dark “five o’clock shadow.” De Niro’s portrayal of his constant worried expression, his obvious nervousness, and his social ineptness completes the picture and proves De Niro a wise casting choice. He is completely believable in the role.

Another element used in this film that adds strength to its theme is voice-over narration, the use of a human voice off-screen that can have a variety of functions. Scorsese uses it to add a sense of authenticity and to tell the viewer what cannot satisfactorily be conveyed by cinematic means. Originating from Travis’s reading of entries in his journal, the voice-over narration in *Taxi Driver* gives clear insight into Bickle’s innermost thoughts and feelings, insight that is essential to understanding the real forces that drive the action of the film. Travis’s sense of angst about his environment and his place in it, and his overwhelming desire for “a real rain to come and wash all this scum off the streets,” are expressed only in voice-over. The soft, understated tone and unhurried rhythmic pace provide a chilling “verbal essence” to De Niro’s narration, in ironic contrast to the anger and violence simmering inside the character. The sound of De Niro’s voice combined with the environmental noises of the city enhances the dichotomy seen within the character of Bickle. The contrast between his calm, soft monotone and the chaotic, noisy, fast-paced street sounds helps to create another level of tension in the film.

From the opening scene to the final scene, the background music also plays an important role. The rhythmic drumbeats in opposition to the melodic harp and orchestral sounds create a haunting cadence echoed throughout the film, evoking strong emotional responses. The drumbeats are pounding and heavy as opposed to the light, melodic sounds of the orchestra. We can feel our hearts beating in time with these beats while we breathe a sigh of relief with the orchestral sounds. The use of the harp during the final shootout is also especially effective, casting an eerie, surreal feeling over that portion of the film.

(name typing, dialogue, and appearance). She then proceeds to discuss each of these aspects in the order named.

In the second paragraph of the body, the writer provides transition (“Another element”), introduces that element (“voice-over narration”), and then proceeds with her description of its effective use in the film. The writer scores points here for her clear and sensitive description of the special qualities of the voice-over and for the well-chosen quotation.

The third element to be analyzed, background music, is introduced in this paragraph’s first sentence. The transitional “also” signals the new subject. Although music is hard to describe and the writer is sensitive to its overall effects, she loses points by simply generalizing the term “orchestral.” What style of music is being

306–310
292–293
254–257

267–269

used? Do certain kinds of instruments (such as strings, brass, or woodwinds) dominate the “orchestral” score?

218 The fourth element, unusual visual images, is introduced by the first sentence of this paragraph, with the transitional “also” again signaling a new subject. In this same sentence, the writer provides a breakdown of the topics to be covered: slow motion, unique camera angles, and color. She then proceeds to discuss the topics in the order named.

The concluding paragraph in this simple pattern has two definite requirements:

1. It should remind the reader of the main points covered in the paper (the elements analyzed and the film’s theme).

2. It should make “ending noises,” giving the reader a sense that the paper is finished.

The brief conclusion provided here meets both of those requirements.

Unusual visual images also contribute significantly to the overall effect of *Taxi Driver*, especially Scorsese’s use of slow motion, unique camera angles, and color. Slow motion, a technique often used to “stretch the moment” in order to intensify its emotional quality, is used in the final battle scene in the hallway. The shootout takes only a brief moment of time yet seems painfully long and brutal when viewed in slow motion. An exceptionally high camera angle is used at the ending of this scene. The camera seemingly retreats into the ceiling, drawn up and above the action, to create an almost ethereal mood. This unusual overhead view creates a strangely mixed reaction, enhancing the emotional impact of the scene by drawing the viewer into the action and away from it at the same time. This same scene is made potent by the use of contrast in color. As Bickle travels the staircase, the lighting is dim with a yellow cast, giving a cold eerie feel to the scene. The last quiet scene in the hotel room displays stark reds, which echo the brutality and violence of the earlier scene and send the audience into aftershock. These powerful visual images add greatly to the intensity of our emotional response to the film.

The skillful use of characterization, music and sound effects, voice-over narration, and unusual visual techniques helps to make *Taxi Driver* a striking and dynamic film. Through Martin Scorsese’s masterful direction, Travis Bickle’s poignant struggle for identity and human dignity becomes an unforgettable film experience.

Sample Student Paper: Analysis for Study

Here is another sample essay. Use the margins to make your own annotations about the important points in this analysis.

Honor Versus Passion: May and Ellen as Dramatic Foils in *The Age of Innocence*

—CAROLYN DENISE TOMLINSON

New York in the 1870s paid homage to the Victorian age of England. Bound by excessive rules of etiquette and by a society dominated by the “right” bloodlines, the narrator of Martin Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence* explains, “this was a world balanced so precariously that its harmony could be shattered by a whisper.” Scorsese’s film shows us this world through the eyes of Newland Archer, a wealthy young lawyer from one of the acceptable families. Based on Edith Wharton’s novel, the film uses the cinematic technique of dramatic foils to illustrate Archer’s battle between honor and passion.

Engaged to May Welland, one of the gems of New York society, Newland Archer is tempted by the arrival of the beautiful Countess Olenska. The countess has escaped from a disastrous marriage to a Polish count and has returned home to her family. Her arrival scandalizes the proper society, and she feels the backlash for her unacceptable behavior soon after she arrives. Archer, however, feels honor-bound to protect his fiancée's cousin and uses his family connections to ensure her admittance to society. Throughout the film, May Welland, Archer's fiancée, and Ellen, Countess Olenska, are established as dramatic foils. By using this technique in casting, costuming, setting, and characterization, Scorsese is able to communicate the vast differences between the characters as well as to establish their opposing positions in the society of New York. The casting of May and Ellen provides one of the most obvious elements of the dramatic foil. May is portrayed by Winona Ryder, Ellen by Michelle Pfeiffer. The actresses' physical characteristics are the first indication of the dramatic foil device: Ryder is a waifish brunette, whereas Pfeiffer is a willowy blonde. The age difference between May and Ellen is also easily distinguished through casting. Ryder gives a subtle but powerful performance as the twenty-two-year-old May; Pfeiffer, as the older worldly-wise Ellen, invests her character with a mystery that is essential to the role. By casting actresses with contrasting physical attributes and ages, Scorsese provides an immediate sense of their characters' opposing personalities.

Another example of how May and Ellen are dramatic foils in the film is the way in which they are costumed. When we first see the two ladies, sitting together in the balcony of the opera house, May is dressed in pale pink with white gloves and fresh flowers for adornment, while Ellen is wearing a turquoise gown and lavish jewelry. During dinner at the Van der Luydens, May and Ellen are also costumed very differently. As the narrator, Joanne Woodward, explains, "Dining with the Van der Luydens was at best no light matter. Dining there with a duke who was their cousin was almost a religious solemnity." Not only does the countess arrive late, but she does so wearing a bright red gown. May, on the other hand, is attired in a pale, almost white, gown, which we learn is the appropriate choice when Mrs. Van der Luyden mentions how lovely she looks and tells us that the duke thinks May "the handsomest woman in the room."

The actresses are also given very different hair and makeup styles. May's hair always appears smooth and shiny, and her makeup emphasizes her youth with pinks and pale tones. Ellen, however, is frequently seen in unflattering, harsher makeup tones, and her hair is often frizzy and ruffled. Through these physical characterizations, we are encouraged further to see the characters as opposites.

In addition, Scorsese uses setting to establish May and Ellen as dramatic foils. Although May and Ellen both live in New York, May lives in a lavishly decorated mansion, whereas Ellen lives in an "odd little house" in the wrong part of town. In one scene, Archer and Ellen are visiting at the Beauford farm. They are surrounded by ice and snow and are huddled beneath mounds of clothing. Immediately following this scene, we see May in a beautiful garden in Florida, surrounded by fresh flowers and flooded in sunlight.

Flowers are likewise important in another setting that establishes the foil between May and Ellen. Archer sends his fiancée the accustomed daily bouquet of lilies of the valley and notices a brilliant display of yellow roses, which he sends to Ellen. The audience sees Ellen lovingly arranging her flowers that evening in her home, dressed in a white gown with her hair down. The next scene shows us Archer and May, walking through a conservatory the next morning. May, dressed in navy, thanks Archer for her flowers and mentions her surprise over Ellen's reaction to receiving flowers. "She was so very delighted. Don't people

send flowers in Europe?” At this point the audience truly begins to see May differently, as Scorsese, through setting, shows Ellen in the soft light of a fire and May in the bright morning sun.

Even as they are represented as visual opposites, they are also developed as character opposites. May is shown as quiet, demure, and very proper. She is the honorable choice for Archer, and, as the narrator tells us, “Archer’s fiancée was innocent of all these intrigues and of much else. May Welland represented for Archer all that was best in their world, all that he honored, and she anchored him to it.” Ellen, however, is shown as a free-spirited woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. Having lived abroad since her marriage, Ellen operates under a European set of norms and commits several faux pas in the first few minutes on-screen. One of these errors occurs when Ellen holds out her hand to Archer at their introduction. His reaction shows us that her behavior is not appropriate, but instead of embarrassing her, he bows over her hand in welcome. The narrator tells us that Ellen has always been eccentric and “was even allowed to wear black satin at her coming out.”

The final element of the dramatic foil is created in Archer’s relationships with May and Ellen. Although he is charmed by May’s “inexpressive girlishness,” he wonders if he will be challenged by her. The narrator expresses Archer’s feelings and thoughts: “It was wonderful, he thought, how such depths of feeling could coexist with such an absence of imagination.” Archer knows that choosing May will ensure him a place in New York society, but he begins to see that he wants more than just a proper wife: “The taste of the usual was like cinders in his mouth, and there were moments when he felt as if he were being buried alive under his future.”

In contrast, Ellen challenges Archer to think about things he’s never considered and to look at the world in a way he has never imagined. As the narrator observes, “Archer enjoyed such challenges to convention. He questioned conformity in private, but in public he upheld family and tradition.” However, Archer panics when he realizes the depths of his feelings for Ellen and marries May. Although he tries to carry on his relationship with Ellen, it soon becomes impossible. Ellen refuses to hurt her cousin and eventually returns to her husband. In one of their final scenes together, Archer tells her, “You gave me my first glimpse of a real life and then you told me to carry on with a false one. No one can endure that.” She replies, “I’m enduring it.”

Archer tries to leave his wife but is thwarted when he learns that she is pregnant. Accepting his fate, the narrator tells us, “Archer embraced his new marriage even as he reverted to his old inherited ideas about matrimony. It was less trouble to conform with tradition. There was no use trying to emancipate a wife who hadn’t the dimmest notion that she was not free.”

Martin Scorsese masterfully uses the dramatic foil technique in *The Age of Innocence* to establish May, Archer’s innocent and proper fiancée, and Ellen, his witty, exotic love, as opposites. By using this technique in casting, costuming, setting, and characterization, Scorsese is able to compare the two worlds between which Archer must choose. May versus Ellen must be thought of as “Honor” versus “Passion” in *The Age of Innocence*. And, although honor wins in the end, Archer, and the entangled path he follows, is clearly shown by the filmmaker’s use of dramatic foils.