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The Use of Musical Symbolism to Reveal Character

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Background music is essential to storytelling in film and to the functions within filmmaking itself. It can illustrate movement, make connections between scenes, create an atmosphere, show the passing of time, portray emotion, reference a time period or setting, and of course, enhance the overall experience of viewing a film (Hoffman). By analyzing, comparing and contrasting how music plays a role in the films *Merchant of Venice* and *As Good As It Gets*, it becomes apparent that music is not chosen merely through pleasantness. It is chosen through how every aspect of a song or melody is able to deepen an audience's understanding of a character and the movie itself. These aspects in music may be thematic repetitions, musical tone – whether major, minor or both, types of instruments used, or when it is played.

Merchant of Venice and *As Good As It Gets* are set in different time frames and have different styles of music, but the musical techniques used to develop characters are very similar. Taking place in the late 1500s, the music in *Merchant of Venice* is more somber, slow and Medieval sounding than *As Good As It Gets*. In *Merchant of Venice*, Jocelyn Pook's musical score uses medieval instruments such as the lyre, harp, lute, viola, cornet, flauta, recorder and quanam throughout the movie to imply the music of that time, whereas the music in *As Good As It Gets* is mostly orchestral, jazz and pop (The Merchant of Venice [Music from the Motion Picture]). The music in *As Good As It Gets*, composed by Hans Zimmer, has lots of clean

sounding old-time piano, oboe and low strings. These are all audible symbols of Melvin, the protagonist of the movie: His old fashioned nature, negative attitude and clean cut way of life.

The first musical technique used in both movies is the absence of music to reveal the antagonist. It is said that the villain in literature is the refuser of festivities and personal connections (Ryken, Leland). Music, being one of the most emotionally unifying forms of art, is often rejected by villains. The director first shows this in *Merchant of Venice* by not having music behind Shylock's dialogue. Shylock first illustrates his hate for music when he instructs Jessica to, "Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum... Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter" (Shakespeare, William. *Merchant of Venice*. 1600. Print.). Music has been an integral part of community, celebration and expression since the dawn of time. Shylock's resentment towards music shows that he does not care for personal connections, celebration or fellowship. His hate for Christian music develops his character as antisocial and bitter to any non-Jew. This solidifies the audience's beliefs that he is a man who loves no one, due to his racism in Venice.

The absence of music to show character is also used in *As Good as It Gets* with Melvin, but slightly differently. Instead of a complete lack of music while Melvin is onscreen, the pretty, light jazz typical of the movie will stop when Melvin says something demeaning to someone. The best example of this is during the restaurant scene when the main characters drive to Baltimore, and Melvin tells Carol over dinner that she "makes him want to be a better man" (Brooks, James. *As Good as It Gets*. 1997. Film.). Carol reveals that she has feelings for Melvin and kisses him. While Carol and Melvin are finally sharing their emotions and connecting romantically, a flowing, romantic orchestral melody is playing in the background. The beautiful string melody with the high flute is meant to symbolize Melvin and Carol. The beautiful, strong

flute is Carol, and the lower, darker strings are Melvin. The music is in a major key, which is often described as the “happy” sounding key. The music in this scene is meant to contrast the mostly dissonant, low cello music that’s played whenever Melvin is onscreen. *As Good As It Gets* is a comedy of humors, meaning that the characters are imbalanced: Simon is too passive, Melvin is too narcissistic, and Carol cares for her son too much. The musical harmony found in the restaurant scene reflects the newfound emotional harmony between Carol and Melvin, and balance of their characters. They are finally getting along, and Melvin’s rude personality isn’t getting in the way of that. Later in the film however, when Melvin says he took Carol out so she wouldn’t have sex with Simon instead of him, the music stops. The end of musical harmony shows that the emotional harmony between them has also been broken.

Another musical technique, used in both movies, is using musical themes for characters and showing evolution of characters through alteration of these themes. There is a “fantasy world” and a “real world” in the movies, and the music reflects this. In *Merchant of Venice*, the “real world” is the place of intense violence, hate and racism that is Venice, and the “fantasy world” is Belmont, Portia’s palace of riches, love and happiness. The audience first sees the real world theme in *Merchant of Venice*, titled “Ghetto”. The low, minor keyed, somber music that starts off the movie includes many Middle Eastern musical elements to connect the theme to Jews. This includes Yiddish chant, melismatic ornamentation, and lyre. This style recurs during the synagogue service, and “Ghetto” reappears when Jessica elopes. “Ghetto” starkly contrasts from the next theme, titled “Portia”. As Bassanio pleads for money in Antonio’s room, he describes Portia. As he imagines her, her theme starts playing. As Bassanio ascends into the beautiful fantasy world that is marrying Portia, the audience ascends into light, delicate, ethereal

harp music. Portia represents light and beauty, and the discrimination of the Jews represents the dark reality.

This “real world vs. fantasy world” theme also appears in *As Good As It Gets*, with the fantasy world being Melvin’s romance novels, and the real world being him living with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. The “real world” theme, titled “1, 2, 3, 4, 5” is first introduced when Melvin enters his apartment, and the audience witnesses him lock the door and hit the light switches obsessively. “1, 2, 3, 4, 5” is played on low strings, symbolizing Melvin’s dark, misanthropic personality. The melody stands out, is cleanly plucked, and repeats the same melodic motif, showing the meticulous pattern in Melvin’s life. This theme appears whenever Melvin’s obsessive tendencies are shown. Examples of this are when he first walks to the restaurant, avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk, and he disgruntledly shows up at Carol’s house because she isn’t at work. The pattern of this theme playing whenever Melvin goes to the restaurant reflects the pattern of his life. When Carol isn’t at work, this pattern is disrupted, and the theme returns as he searches for ways to repair the structure of his day. This theme later transitions to Carol, when she randomly shows up at Melvin’s house, to tell him that she, “will never sleep with” him (Brooks, James. *As Good as It Gets*. 1997. Film.). The transition of Melvin’s theme onto Carol shows that she is becoming like him. Showing up at his house unannounced like he did earlier, and her obsessive writing of the letter further demonstrate this point. The last, most important theme in the movie is titled “Greatest Woman on Earth”, and it represents Melvin’s fantasy world. The theme is a super romantic melody played on string and wind instruments, with smooth melodic lines, trills and swells of dynamic. It first appears when Melvin is writing his romance novel and reappears when he is talking to Carol in the restaurant. This time, it is played an octave lower. The fact that the same theme plays while Melvin is

writing romance novels and when he is talking to Carol reveals that Carol is the love in his fantasy. The higher octave originally used shows that it is more of a head-in-the-clouds fantasy, whereas the lower octave shows that those romantic feelings are still there, but just on a realer, more grounded level. At the end of the movie, the romantic theme ultimately returns for one last beautiful swell of music when Melvin tells Carol she is “the greatest woman on earth” (Brooks, James. *As Good as It Gets*. 1997. Film.). His fantasy finally comes true as they embrace and embark on a relationship together. His dream romance with Carol is finally coming to life, and the music comes to life with it.

As there are always ups and downs in comedy, there are ups and downs in the music accompanying it. Music can affect the audience’s thoughts and inner feelings without them even noticing it, and give them a much deeper understanding of characters, their relationships and their development. Much of the time music does a better job at explaining complex emotions and personal change than the character experiencing it can. Music in films serves the purpose of expressing the character’s thoughts, relationships, and traits better than anyone could with words.

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