

## CASABLANCA NOTES

A Hynes

### Key Facts

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FULL TITLE · Casablanca

DIRECTOR · Michael Curtiz

TYPE OF WORK · Melodrama, war movie

GENRE · Drama

LANGUAGE · English (with some German and French)

TIME AND PLACE PRODUCED · Hollywood, 1942

AWARDS

- Oscars (1943):
- *Best Picture*, Jack Warner (Warner Bros.)
- *Best Director*, Michael Curtiz
- *Best Screenplay*, Howard Koch, Julius J. Epstein, and Philip G. Epstein

DATE OF RELEASE · Released in New York in late 1942 and nationwide in early 1943

PRODUCER · Hal Wallis

SETTING (TIME) · December 1941

SETTING (PLACE) · Casablanca in French-ruled Morocco

PROTAGONIST · Rick Blaine

MAJOR CONFLICT · The major conflict is between Rick and Ilsa as he tries to understand and she tries to explain their suddenly aborted relationship in Paris. The conflict soon expands beyond their romantic past to involve Laszlo and his attempt to escape to Lisbon.

**RISING ACTION** · The conflict between Ilsa and Rick is ignited when Ilsa shows up in Rick's Cafe with Laszlo. Laszlo and Ilsa plan only to pass through Casablanca, but the difficulty of obtaining letters of transit and the fact that the jealous Rick has the letters forces Ilsa and Rick into frequent contact and conflict.

**CLIMAX** · The climax of the film appears to be the lovers' reconciliation in Rick's apartment, but Rick's decision at the airport to let Ilsa leave with Laszlo soon trumps this earlier scene.

**FALLING ACTION** · The falling action begins with Rick's idealistic pronouncements at the airport about personal sacrifice, which justify his decision to let Ilsa leave with Laszlo, and culminates in his murder of Strasser, an act that ensures Ilsa and Laszlo's safe departure but forces Rick into further exile.

**THEMES** · The difficulty of neutrality; the inescapable past; the power of lady luck

**MOTIFS** · Exile and traveling; dreaming of America in Africa; spotlight

**SYMBOLS** · Sam's piano; Laszlo; the plane to Lisbon and the letters of transit

**FORESHADOWING**

- The plane to Lisbon that passes over Louis and Rick as they sit outside Rick's Café on the first evening foreshadows the end of the movie, when the two friends again watch a plane depart for Lisbon, this one carrying Ilsa and Laszlo.
  - Ferrari's attempt to purchase Rick's Café in the beginning foreshadows the eventual sale of the Café when Rick decides to leave Casablanca.
  - The gunfight in the Casablanca market at the beginning of the movie foreshadows the gunfight between Rick and Strasser at the end, though in the latter fight the good guy wins.
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## Themes

### The Difficulty of Neutrality

In love and in war, neutrality is difficult for Rick, Ilsa, and Louis to maintain. Rick makes a point of not being involved in politics. He refuses to discuss the war, shuts up Carl's attempts to tell him about meetings of the underground, and does everything in his power to present himself as nonpartisan. Later on, though, just as the United States abandoned neutrality in December 1941, Rick shifts from neutrality to commitment. His sympathy for the Allies has always been evident in small acts, such as his refusal to allow the Deutsche Bank employee entry into the back room of his casino, but his partisanship grows more overt as the film proceeds. Louis undergoes a similar transformation, and by the end of the film, neutrality seems an untenable position. Rick's Café, as well as Casablanca itself, is an oasis in the desert, a paradise far removed from the troubles of the world. Yet the underground and black market activities that take place at Rick's belie these qualities. The battle of German and French anthems that erupts in the bar shows that Rick's actually teems with political passion. When Ilsa visits Rick in his apartment and confesses that she still loves him, she does her best to be neutral in the undeclared war between the two men who love her. For as long as she can, she tries to deny the dilemma she faces. When she finally acknowledges the dilemma and realizes she has to decide between Rick and Laszlo, she leaves the choice in Rick's hands. No clean, painless resolution is possible, and a choice must be made. In war as in love, *Casablanca* suggests, neutrality is unsustainable.

### The Inescapable Past

The first words of "As Time Go By" announce, "You must remember this," and in *Casablanca*, Rick, Ilsa, and Louis cannot escape the past and their memories. Even when characters try to flee from the past, and many do, the past catches up with them. On two

occasions, Ilsa believes she has lost men in her life, only to have them reappear at the most inconvenient times. In Casablanca, Rick has created a lifestyle for himself that he believes will allow him to forget his painful memories, but the war and the flock of refugees hoping to escape to America remind him of an event or events from his mysterious life that prevent his return home. Likewise, Ilsa's arrival in Casablanca reminds Rick of their painful love story, the memory of which he has been trying to erase. The only character who suggests that the past can be escaped is Louis, who seems able to switch alliances breezily. Yet even Louis eventually acknowledges that his decisions have consequences. He recognizes that he must flee Casablanca because there is no escaping the way he helped Rick. He might want to ignore the past, but in this case he cannot.

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### **Laszlo**

Laszlo is both a character and a symbol in *Casablanca*. His symbolic elements are rooted in his upstanding, moral personality. Before Laszlo arrives in Casablanca, Rick stirs from apathy at the mention of his name. Laszlo is a symbol of resistance to the Nazis, and his personal conflict of whether or not he can escape Casablanca represents a much larger struggle for power and control. The Nazis officially control the city, but the underground resistance has the support of the majority of the people. The balance of power teeters precariously between the two groups. Laszlo's ability to escape Casablanca will be a sign as to which group may ultimately prevail. That Laszlo was able to escape from a concentration camp and then make his way to Casablanca indicates that the Nazi control over the European mainland is not absolute. If Laszlo can find his way to America, his escape will be a symbol of the power of resistance to Nazi rule. What happens to Laszlo himself is important, but the implications of his fate make up *Casablanca's* broader themes.

## **The Plane to Lisbon and the Letters of Transit**

The plane to Lisbon is the best way to leave Casablanca, and it represents the possibility of escape from war-torn Europe and the first, most difficult step of the journey to America and freedom. The letters of transit are the golden tickets out, the exit visas that cannot be refused. Throughout the movie these letters are what everyone wants, and whoever controls or holds the letters has tremendous power. As *Casablanca* proceeds, the power shifts hands. At first, the civic authority of Casablanca, in the person of Louis, controls the plane's flights, and Rick, who possesses the letters, wields this power and has control of people's fates. Later, Rick transfers the letters to Ilsa and Laszlo, allowing them to depart on the plane. As a result of this exchange, the escaping refugees gain a powerful status as political symbols, while Louis and Rick's own power in Casablanca is weakened. The two self-sacrificing heroes have no choice but to leave the city and start over elsewhere.

## **Political Allegory**

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*Casablanca* is an exploration of the universal themes of love and sacrifice, but when the film was released in 1942, audiences viewed it as a political allegory about World War II. The film is set in December 1941, the month in which the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. That attack changed the course of American history, awakening the nation from political neutrality and thrusting it into the midst of World War II. *Casablanca* tells the story of a similar, though much smaller, awakening. At the beginning of the film, Rick is a cynical bar owner in the Moroccan city of Casablanca who drinks only by himself and doesn't care about politics. By the end of the film, he has become a self-sacrificing idealist, committed to the anti-Nazi war effort. The event that prompts this change in Rick is the appearance of Ilsa, his old flame, in Casablanca. Ilsa's arrival is unexpected and devastating, and it hits Rick just as hard as the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor hit America. Once Rick overcomes the initial pain, his

moral sense is reignited. He doesn't get to live happily ever after with Ilsa, but he accepts the necessity of his sacrifice and the heartbreak that accompanies it. If Ilsa hadn't reappeared in his life, Rick would still be stuck in a life of bitterness in Casablanca. Instead, he is reawakened to the world and to himself.

The film also tells the story of another transformation, that of the local French commander of Casablanca, Captain Louis Renault. Louis begins the film as a pro-Vichy Nazi-appeaser but winds up a committed partisan of free France. American Rick and European Louis look out for each other's interests throughout the film, but only at the end does their relationship become anything more than the self-serving alliance of two cynics. "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship," Rick says in the film's last line, thereby cementing not only their friendship, but also the maturing anti-Nazi coalition their friendship symbolizes. In the film's political allegory, Rick and Louis's relationship suggests the U.S.'s relationship to its allies in World War II.

While Rick and Louis find their political identity only at the end of the film, a number of other characters know where they stand from the beginning. In large part, this certainty has to do with their nationality. Victor Laszlo, the famous anti-Nazi writer, is Czech, and since Nazi Germany's first expansionist move was against Czechoslovakia, the Czechs knew of Nazi evil before anyone else. Similarly, all of the characters who support Casablanca's anti-Nazi underground are from nations that resisted German rule. They include the Norwegians Berger and Ilsa and the Russian bartender Sacha. On the other hand, many of the film's unseemly characters, such as the criminal Ugarte, the black market schemer Signor Ferrari, and the bumbling officer Tonelli, are Italian, and Italy was an ally of Germany during the war. While the Italians may not be worthy of admiration, none are as cruel and ruthless as Major Strasser, the film's archetypal Nazi villain.