
CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS

WHAT MAKES MOST characters interesting is often not the characters themselves but rather their *relationship* with other characters. Characters are defined, not so much by what they are as by what they do, and what they do in drama is to interact with other people. *Casablanca* is a film in which the characters sit around doing an incredible amount of gabbing about causes and courage and it even deals with that most deadly of cinematic topics: political philosophy. At the same time, it also creates one of the most memorable and often-quoted set of characters in film history.

Rick, who runs a gin joint in an isolated and obscure corner of the world, doesn't *do* a whole lot. His first important line, after all, is "I stick my neck out for nobody," and for the first half of the film, he doesn't. The Letters of Transit, the McGuffin (see: MCGUFFIN) around which the action revolves, are not something Rick has worked to obtain — they're *given* to him by Peter Lorre's sniveling weasel of a character, Ugarte, whom Rick disdains so much he doesn't lift a finger to save him. Throughout the film, this morally ambiguous character *responds* to others who come to him rather than initiating action on his own.

It is Rick's relationships that make *Casablanca* one of the most memorable popular films ever made. He becomes an interesting character through his interaction with Louis Renault, the police captain; Major Strasser, the sneering Nazi; Victor Laszlo, the Czech patriot. And what would Rick be without Ilsa Lund, the bewildered former lover who is inconveniently married to the only man

Rick really admires. Finally, who can forget Sam, the piano player who has very few lines in the film but sings the unforgettable, “As Time Go By”?

Even his relationship with minor characters helps develop Rick’s character: Yvonne, the singer; Sascha, the bartender; Carl, the waiter; Annina, the Bulgarian immigrant; Berger, the member of the Free French underground; Signor Ferrari, the rival saloon keeper. Every character’s *relationship* with Rick Blaine adds another brushstroke that helps reveal the portrait of one of the most memorable characters in film.

Michael Corleone relates with his father and his two brothers, the one who is too quick and the one who is too slow. His relationship with Kay doesn’t become very interesting until the very end, when he betrays her, but his relationship with Sollozzo, the drug dealer and McCluskey the crooked cop, with Clemenza, the fat *capo* and Tessio, the tall, thin, *capo* are interesting and in constant flux.

Considered by himself, T. E. Lawrence is a bit of a prig and not all that interesting. Sherif Ali, Auda abu Tayi, Prince Feisal, General Allenby, Dryden the diplomat, and even the Turkish Bey he has a one-night stand with make his character interesting. If you lived next door to Benjamin Braddock (*The Graduate*), R. P. McMurphy (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*), or J. J. Gittes (*Chinatown*), you’d probably say they were irritating nobodies — they only become interesting when they have someone to inter-relate with.

In a sense, we might say there is no such thing as an inherently interesting character — there are only interesting character *relationships*.