

John Buaas

English Composition I

The 70-Minute Moment in *Casablanca*



Casablanca (1942; dir. Michael Curtiz). From left to right: Annina Brandel (played by Joy Page), Jan Brandel (Helmut Dantine), and Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains).

Visually, this scene from *Casablanca* appears to be very simple: three characters in the foreground, positioned so as to form a triangle that opens toward the viewer; some other people standing and sitting in the background; a lamp with a translucent fringed shade with elaborately-patterned stitching or beadwork that casts complicated shadow patterns (an example of which we can see on the wall in the background on the far left, cast by another lamp that we cannot see); an arched passage in the middle background leading to a heavy carved wooden door; and, just out of

frame on the right, behind Renault, the doorway leading out of the casino. The strong verticals—the characters, walls, and doorway—give the image an almost static quality. In this moment the Brandels, Bulgarian refugees who have been trying to raise enough money to obtain a visa to leave Casablanca for Lisbon, Portugal, are leaving the casino located in the rear of Rick's, the bar run by the American expatriate Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart). Jan Brandel has just won a great deal of money at roulette, thanks to Rick's telling the roulette croupier to rig the wheel in Jan's favor. (Rick's reasons for doing this are complicated, as we will see.) Renault has witnessed this and is attempting to leave the casino when the Brandels see him and attempt to give him the money for their visa; Renault tells them to come to his office the next morning instead and pay him then. Here at the 70-minute mark, Renault is speaking; his words at the 1:10:00 mark are italicized: "It's very strange that you won . . . *well, not so strange, really.*" The Brandels leave the casino (and the film) immediately after this scene: they never reappear.

The image itself may be simple; moreover, seeing as it is from the final episode of the subplot of the Brandels' dealings with Renault, it may seem at first that it has little to contribute to our overall understanding of *Casablanca*. However, this scene actually contains two small but important pieces of information that I think deepen our appreciation of the film.

First, note the patterned shadows on the far wall. Shadows in *Casablanca*, as is true of all well-made black-and-white films, aid in conveying emotional information: without color to shape our emotional response(s) to a scene, lighting directors for black-and-white films pay very close attention to gradations of light and shadow. Patterned or asymmetrical shadows are intended to convey emotional conflict, and in two important night-time scenes in *Casablanca* between Rick and Ilsa (who had been lovers in Paris before the Nazis invaded France, became separated, and have unexpectedly and unhappily reunited in Casablanca—this is the film's main plot), you do not have to

be watching too closely to notice the bold, complicated shadows on the walls behind the characters. In the case of the scene pictured above, we see that the shadowed pattern is slightly distorted as an effect of the lamplight's shining through the pattern onto the wall at an oblique angle. Moreover, while we can easily see the shadows, they do not dominate the background. Appropriately, then, some emotional conflict is present here: the Brandels are alternately stunned by Rick's intervention at the roulette table and thrilled by the sudden realization that they will be able to leave Casablanca the next day; add to those emotions Annina's added emotion of relief, as I will explain shortly. Renault, on the other hand, feels disappointment, as he will tell Rick almost immediately after this moment.

Here is why: Renault, whose office is responsible for granting visas, sets the price people pay for receiving them; if women are not able to pay what he asks, he forgoes the balance by insisting on having sex with them. Annina, we learn in her conversation she has with Rick a few minutes before the casino scene, had already agreed to have sex with Renault to obtain her and her husband's visas without telling her husband she has done this; she is terribly conflicted about her decision but decides that the greater good is the sacrifice of her virtue in order for her and Jan to leave Casablanca. (None of this, by the way, is stated directly in the film. Because of censorship rules in those days, the film could not be explicit about the details of Renault's (or anyone's) sexual behavior.) Now that Jan has the money, Annina no longer has to go through with her earlier decision. Hence her relief, and Renault's disappointment. Thus, each of the participants in this scene feels something different from the others, which is echoed by the slight distortion of the patterned shadow on the wall in the background.

This brings me to Renault's remark in this scene, "It's very strange that you won . . . *well, not so strange, really.*" It is difficult to know exactly what Renault means here. The obvious meaning is

that he suspects that Rick is responsible for the Brandels' sudden good fortune; however, I sense that Renault would like to know *why* Rick intervened. Rick and Renault are friends of a sort, but Rick does not approve of Renault's overcharging for visas or having sex with those women who cannot pay. Even so, Rick had (probably) never intervened in this way before—Rick's famous saying about himself is, "I stick my neck out for nobody."

Renault, at least during the film, never learns why Rick sticks his neck out this time. However, I think we can make a guess. As I mentioned earlier, Rick's former lover Ilsa has arrived in Casablanca in the company of her husband, the famed Resistance fighter Victor Laszlo. Though Ilsa clearly loves Victor, it's equally as clear that she still loves Rick—to the point that if he only asked her, Ilsa would leave Victor. But Rick knows that Ilsa has endured sacrifice and hardship so she can be with Victor during his work with the Resistance, and I think Rick sees that same willingness to sacrifice in Annina Brandel. He admires that in her and so has the croupier rig the roulette wheel in her husband's favor so as to spare her the indignity of having sex with Renault to obtain the visas. It is also in that moment that Rick decides he will make his own sacrifice and insist that Ilsa leave Casablanca with Victor: Rick, in the casino scene, had just told Annina that her husband was "a lucky guy," and he will later acknowledge, through his sacrifice, that Victor Laszlo is likewise a lucky man.

As I mentioned at the end of the first paragraph of this paper, when the Brandels leave this scene a few seconds after this moment, they never reappear in the film. From the 70th minute on, *Casablanca* is dedicated to the working out of its main plot, the love story between Rick and Ilsa. Yet without the story of Rick sticking out his neck for the Brandels, the story whose end we see captured in the image above, that other story might have ended very differently.