

AN EXAMPLE OF A FILM REVIEW

Amadeus (Republic Pictures. The Paul Zantz Company. Directed by Milos Forman, 1984).

Comment [r1]: Set out the title in this way.

In a combination of brilliant colour, magnificent scenery, effective characterization and exquisite music, Peter Schaffer's play *Amadeus* was translated to the silver screen by Milos Forman in 1984. *Empire* described the film as 'a truly memorable, devastating experience'¹ and it won a total of eight Academy Awards including that of Best Picture. The narrative presents the court composer, Antonio Salieri (F. Murray Abraham), confessing to a priest, and describing in flashback how he encountered and then plotted the downfall, if not also the murder, of the precociously talented and, according to the film, lecherous, infantile and ill-mannered Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Tom Hulce).

Comment [r2]: The film is introduced by referring to background information including how it was received.

Comment [r3]: This sentence summarizes the whole plot of the film.

As the plot thickens and the audience is drawn into Salieri's homicidal ambitions, so they are carried away by the sheer genius of his younger adversary and the sublime beauty of his music, emphasized in the film by the fiction that Mozart composed by merely transcribing the melodies he heard in his head. The contrast between the two composers could not be more telling. Salieri is focused but struggles and agonizes over his compositions. Mozart is vulgar and composes 'so joyously that he seemed', Salieri complained, 'to be "taking dictation from God"'. Yet Salieri is highly respected, wealthy and well-connected, while Mozart is 'new' and no-one seems to appreciate how good his music is, except for the disgruntled older composer.² Salieri is chaste and apparently pious, following a bargain made with God in his youth as he sought to dedicate his life to composing music: 'Make me great ... make me famous through the world. Make me immortal. Let everyone speak my name with love ... In return, I promise you ... my chastity ... my industry ... and my deep humility'.³

Comment [r4]: Significant details from the plot are discussed in this paragraph and an important quotation from the film is used to support the argument of the review.

The bargain, the film suggests, seems to have been struck when his father died prematurely, choking on a fishbone. But as the story is told in flashback, the audience already knows that the once famous court composer is unfamiliar to his and unrecognized by his contemporaries, his music no longer played, the bargain unfulfilled. As he recounts his story, so it becomes clear that while Mozart was the focus of his envy, God is the one who has failed him. In a telling scene, Salieri takes down the crucifix from the wall and casts it into the fire, saying: 'From now on we are enemies, you and I. Because you choose for your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy, and you leave me only the ability to recognize your incarnation'.⁴ Salieri feels taunted by God for giving Mozart the talent. Thus God becomes the focus of his anger and, in seeking his revenge, he schemes the downfall of God's beloved (*Amadeus*).

Comment [r5]: Again, further details are outlined with a further quotation sealing the analysis.

¹ Quoted on the video cassette case.

² From a review by Roger Ebert, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-amadeus-1984>, accessed 28 September 2015.

³ Quoted in Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue With American Culture* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1993), p. 33.

⁴ Quoted in Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies*, p. 35.

The plot is, of course, fictitious in virtually every aspect.⁵ As such the film serves as a mythical tale, taking liberty with the historical realities in order to say something more profound about the human condition. Three religious interpretations are possible.

Comment [r6]: Much space could have been used in outlining this, but that would have reduced space for the religious interpretation below. The reference points readers to where they could go if interested in finding out more about this.

John Fulbright has argued that Mozart is a 'Christ-figure', whose music is symbolic 'of God's love for human beings'. He is the one who suffers for his art and thus for being the vehicle of divine communication. Salieri 'symbolizes Jesus' human antagonists, as well as the disciples who desert Christ, but who are ultimately redeemed by their own sufferings'.⁶ Thus the narrative mirrors Jesus' story, though resurrection occurs only in Mozart achieving the kind of immortality desperately sought by Salieri.

Comment [r7]: A brief justification for the religious interpretations.

Comment [r8]: Evidence of reading.

Robert Jewett sees the film as an exposition of 'Paul's theory of sin and forgiveness' as described in Romans 1 and 3. Mozart is portrayed as offending conventional morality, and his dissolute life certainly reflects that of someone living 'under sin'. Nevertheless, it is the 'law abiding, hard working and disciplined'⁷ Salieri, feigning friendship while plotting Mozart's downfall, who 'reveals the deeper, and ultimately more pervasive level of sin'.⁸ For it is Salieri who seeks immortality, the court composer who wants all to 'speak his name with love', two things which belong to the Creator and not to creatures. The film shows the pervasiveness of sin: 'for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Roms 3:23), though there is little by way of absolution, forgiveness and redemption (apart from Salieri acknowledging the music of the final scene of Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, where a philandering husband asks forgiveness of his wife, to be an absolution on the whole audience).

Comment [r9]: The paragraph succinctly describes Fulbright's point and raises a critical question.

For Gregory Allen Robbins, the film is an allegory of the story of Cain and Abel, that 'the Lord had regard for Abel [Mozart] and his offering, but for Cain [Salieri] and his offering he had no regard' (Gen. 4:4-5). While the echoes of the biblical story are clear, there is little resolution of such apparent imbalance in the film itself, with the audience haunted by Salieri's bitter accusation addressed to God: 'you are unjust, unfair, unkind'. We are left to ourselves to accept our lot in life rather than aspire to that which we could never achieve.

Comment [r10]: Again, the paragraph demonstrates evidence of reading, succinctly describes Jewett's case and raises a critical question.

The film can certainly be perceived as a meditation on pride, jealousy, anger and disappointment all of which can lead to the most extreme of actions. But whether the audience is drawn into the inequality and injustice of life as perceived by Salieri or amazed at the sheer talent of Mozart and shaken by his unsympathetic

Comment [r11]: Again, reading is evidenced, the point succinctly made and a critical question raised.

⁵ For details, see Gregory Allen Robbins, 'Mozart and Salieri, Cain and Abel: A Cinematic Transformation of Genesis 4', *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 1.1 April 1997. <http://cid.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/robbins.htm> accessed 28 September 2015.

⁶ J. Fulbright, 'An Analysis of *Amadeus*', unpublished manuscript (1996), quoted in Robbins, 'Mozart and Salieri, Cain and Abel'.

⁷ Jewett, *St Paul at the Movies*, p. 39.

⁸ Jewett, *St Paul at the Movies*, p. 32.

treatment by the establishment, the film remains absorbing as it cleverly spins its narrative and intersperses it with stunning imagery and beautiful sound. For the most part the audience is beguiled and moved to the extremes of emotion, especially as the haunting strains of the *Lacrimosa Dies Irae* (On this day full of tears) from the *Requiem* accompany the perfunctory and somewhat lonely disposal of Mozart's corpse in an unmarked grave beyond the Vienna's city walls, while the rain pours down almost as a sign of divine pathos in the absence of any corresponding human mourning.

Comment [r12]: A reference to the way in which music and film come together to create an experience for the viewer.

996 words

Comment [r13]: You need to declare word count.