

## Rick, Ilsa, and Laszlo: A Closer Look at Characterization in Casablanca

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Compared to what we find in great novels and plays, the characterization in Casablanca is sketchy and thin. We know very little about the characters' histories and the dialogue is spare. Despite this, and some apparent inconsistencies and slips, I find the major figures to be psychologically interesting and unusually well drawn for a film. Among the many components of Casablanca's greatness, subtlety of characterization is one. The relations between Rick, Ilsa, and Laszlo have been much discussed, but I believe that they deserve a closer look than they have so far received.

It is important to view the characters in their context. Casablanca consists of a group of smaller stories nested within larger stories, the largest being the Axis conquest of Europe that is indicated by the narration at the beginning of the film and a slowly spinning globe showing which nations have been occupied and how the remainder are aligned. Within this frame there are stories of resistance and of efforts to flee "imprisoned Europe" to "the freedom of the Americas." The spinning globe is followed by a map of refugee trails, which leads us to Casablanca, from which people will try to reach Lisbon, the "great embarkation point." A street scene discloses refugees looking upward at a plane they hope will be their means of flight. The film's action is initiated by the murder of German couriers and the theft of letters of transit that offer the possibility of escape.

The emphasis on the longing to get away continues when the scene shifts to Rick's café, where a man who has been "waiting, waiting, waiting" says, "I'll never get out of here. I'll die in Casablanca." We see a woman trying to raise money by selling her jewelry and men making arrangements for an escape by boat. We soon encounter Ugarte, who has stolen the letters and who plans to leave Casablanca with the money they will bring. He is arrested, however, and perishes before he can get away. Ugarte, Ferrari, and Captain Renault are all engaged in helping people leave, usually for money, but, in the case of Renault, sometimes for sex. An important minor story is that of Annina, the Bulgarian newlywed Rick saves from Renault by enabling her husband to win at roulette. A middle-aged couple, the Leuchtags, celebrate their imminent departure with Carl, the waiter, who is himself a refugee. Later, Ferrari is envious when he thinks that Rick is leaving for America.

With the entrance of Victor and Ilsa Laszlo, the main plot of the film gets under way. Laszlo is a major figure in the underground resistance, making his fate of great importance to both sides. He has escaped the Nazis on three occasions, and Colonel Strasser comes to Casablanca to make sure there will not be a fourth. Since Renault dare not oppose the Gestapo, the forces arrayed against Laszlo are formidable. Ferrari tells him, "It will take a miracle to get you out of Casablanca. And the Germans have outlawed miracles." Laszlo's only hope is to obtain the letters of transit, which, as many critics have pointed out, are an unrealistic plot device. They are the miracle he needs. Laszlo hopes to purchase the letters from Ugarte, but, fearing the police, Ugarte has

given them to Rick for safekeeping. Laszlo tries to get the letters from Rick, but Rick refuses to sell them at any price. After Laszlo leads the singing of the “Marseillaise,” Strasser feels that it is not safe for him either to leave Casablanca or to remain there. He tells Ilsa that the only alternatives are for Laszlo to return to occupied France, to be interned in a concentration camp in Morocco, or to die in Casablanca, where “human life is cheap.” When Ilsa pleads with Rick for the letters, she laments that if he does not help them, Victor Laszlo will be doomed.

As the movie unfolds, it focuses increasingly on the relationship between Rick and Ilsa; but it keeps us aware that their drama is part of the larger story of war, resistance, and escape to which it must ultimately be subordinated. Rick feels that he was jilted by Ilsa in Paris; and because of his resentment, he will not sell Laszlo the letters of transit. He thus becomes the major obstacle to Laszlo’s departure and to his ability to continue working for the resistance. The escape story cannot have a satisfactory conclusion unless there is a change in Rick.

In the climactic scene of the film, Ilsa goes to see Rick to make a final appeal for the letters. She asks him to put “aside” his “feelings for something more important”; but he remains adamant, professing indifference to Laszlo’s fate and to any cause but himself. When he won’t even listen to her account of “what really happened” in Paris, Ilsa’s temper flares: “You want to feel sorry for yourself, don’t you? With so much at stake, all you can think of is your own feeling. One woman has hurt you, and you take your revenge on the rest of the world.”

Ilsa immediately retreats, but what she has said seems accurate. Although critics describe Rick as bitter, cynical, and childishly self-centered, they tend either to gloss over these aspects of his behavior or to forgive and forget them once he relents. Roger Ebert says that people like Casablanca “because the characters in it are all so good, especially Rick and Ilsa” (DVD commentary). Rick behaves gallantly at the end; but for much of the film, he is full of self-pity and a murderous rage. He is out to get revenge on Ilsa and Laszlo, and a terrible one at that. When Ilsa says that without his help, “Victor Laszlo will die in Casablanca,” Rick replies, “What of it? I’m going to die in Casablanca. It’s a good spot for it.” This drives Ilsa to draw a pistol in a desperate effort to obtain the letters, but Rick continues to withhold them and invites her to pull the trigger: “If Laszlo and the cause mean so much to you, you won’t stop at anything . . . . Go ahead and shoot. You’ll be doing me a favor.”

This is the turning point of the movie. When Ilsa drops the gun and becomes “almost hysterical,” Rick takes her in his arms. She tells him that she loved him in Paris and loves him still. Within a very short time, Rick undergoes a remarkable transformation. He embraces the anti-fascist cause, now preaching to Ilsa as she had preached to him; and he articulates the movie’s central theme: “in this crazy world,” the “problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans.” Our personal feelings must be sacrificed to the fight against the enemy. Instead of being the major blocking force, Rick now facilitates the resolution of the plot. He not only helps Laszlo escape but sends Ilsa with him for support, when it seems he could have had her for himself. This is the triumph of goodness that leaves viewers with such a warm glow, leading them to ignore Rick’s earlier vindictiveness. As one of the script writers, Howard Koch, has observed, “if the film had ended with Ilsa going off with Rick, it wouldn’t be a legend today” (DVD interview).

The ending feels good to most of us despite the plot contrivances that have often been pointed out. The changes in Rick and Ilsa are so rapid, so radical, and so essential to the miracle of Laszlo's escape that some have felt them to be contrived as well. Ilsa puts her fate, and Laszlo's, in the hands of a man she has just denounced as completely self-involved; and the bitter, cynical Rick becomes a sentimentalist and a patriot, in the words of Renault.

Umberto Eco feels the characters to be "psychologically incredible" (Koch 1992, 253), a serious charge. His reaction is understandable, for their behavior is sometimes puzzling and extreme. Why is Rick so vindictive that he refuses to save Laszlo's life, despite Ilsa's pleas and the damage he'll be doing to the fight against the Nazis? Why does he tell Ilsa that shooting him would be doing him a favor? Why does his suicidal gesture lead Ilsa to break down and to declare her love? Why does Ilsa choose Rick over Laszlo and "the cause," preferring to stay with Rick rather than leave with her husband? Why does Rick arrange Laszlo's escape at great risk to himself, after having repeatedly said that he won't stick his neck out for anybody? Why does he send Ilsa off with Laszlo when she wants to stay with him? Why does he tell Laszlo that Ilsa had come to him the night before and he had let her pretend that she was still in love with him? Roger Ebert says that "this is one of the nicest things Rick does in the movie" (DVD commentary), but what is Rick trying to accomplish by saying these things? I believe there are good answers to these difficult questions and that, by and large, the behavior of the main characters makes psychological sense.

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Rick undergoes not one but two transformations, the first of which is precipitated by Ilsa's failure to meet him at the railroad station in Paris. In order to appreciate the ways in which Rick changes, we must review what we know of him before this event.

Born in New York City, Rick has lived in Europe for a number of years, and his Gestapo dossier says that he cannot return to the United States. Why he cannot return is never explained. In 1935, he ran guns to Ethiopia; and in 1936, he fought in Spain on the side of the loyalists. He also worked against the fascists at the beginning of World War II. Strasser says that the Gestapo knows what he did in Paris. We never find out what that was, but both Sam and Ilsa are alarmed for Rick when the city is about to fall. Sam says there's a price on Rick's head, and Ilsa says it won't be safe for him because the Germans will find out his record. "I'm on their blacklist already," Rick observes, "their roll of honor." Later Ilsa explains that she did not tell Rick about her need to help Laszlo because he would have remained in Paris and been captured by the Gestapo. Rick is a political idealist who is proud of having fought on the right, though losing, sides.

Rick is a romantic in love as well as in politics. In their scenes together in Paris, Rick and Ilsa are "transported by each other," as the screenplay says. They take a drive in the country and a boat ride on the Seine, toast with champagne ("Here's looking at you, kid"), and share a favorite song, "As Time Goes By." The music, the acting, and the cinematography all heighten the romantic intensity of these scenes. Rick wonders why he has been so lucky as to have found Ilsa unattached. She says there has been another man in her life, but he is dead and there are to be no questions about the past.

The euphoric Rick accepts her conditions. As the Germans are about to arrive, the stage directions describe his manner as “wry, but not the bitter wryness we have seen in Casablanca.” Deliriously happy, sentimental, and deeply enamoured of Ilsa, Rick is the protagonist in a story of star-crossed lovers threatened by irrational forces beyond their control: “With the whole world crumbling, we pick this time to fall in love.”

To secure Ilsa, Rick wants to be married as soon as they reach Marseilles, or, better yet, by the engineer on the train. But on the day they are to leave Paris, Ilsa learns that Laszlo is alive and in need of her, and she must go to him. Distraught, she gives expression to one of the recurring motifs of the film: “Oh, it’s a crazy world.” She cannot tell Rick about Laszlo for fear of compromising them both, but she wants him to know that she loves him should something keep them apart.

In the letter Rick receives at the station, Ilsa again professes her love: “I cannot go with you or ever see you again. Just believe that I love you.” Rick does not believe this, however, but feels betrayed. What he most remembers from his days with Ilsa in Paris is the last one: “A guy standing on a station platform in the rain with a comical look on his face, because his insides had been kicked out.” There is much more than frustrated love and disappointment here. Rick does not feel like a man who has been separated from his beloved for mysterious reasons in a crazy world, but like a man who has been kicked in the gut by the woman he adores and been made to feel like a fool. I don’t feel that I have enough information about Rick to be able fully to understand why he assumes the worst about Ilsa, but it seems evident that he is deeply insecure about his own lovability and experiences her failure to appear as a tremendous blow to his pride.

Traumatized by what he feels to be a profound humiliation, Rick mobilizes his defenses in order to avoid being hurt again. When we first see him in Casablanca, he is an unsociable man who never visits with customers but sits playing solitary chess and drinking alone. When he joins Laszlo, Ilsa, and Renault at their table, Renault says that Rick is “becoming quite human,” a remark that suggests how remote, guarded, and reserved he has been. His café is full of people who are experiencing intense emotions, but Rick remains detached. Becoming involved with other people feels dangerous to him.

Rick has had a liaison with Yvonne, but he dumps her rather brutally: “Where were you last night?” “That’s so long ago, I don’t remember.” “Will I see you tonight?” “I never make plans that far ahead.” While Rick is clever and collected, Yvonne is quite distressed: “What a fool I was to fall for a man like you.” It is now the woman, not Rick, who has been made a fool. Rick may need to get out of relationships with women before he is the one who gets hurt. Given the fact that Yvonne soon shows up with a new boyfriend, and a German at that, we may not take Rick’s treatment of her seriously; but it is cruel nonetheless. Later, when Rick tells Renault that he’ll be using the letters of transit to leave with Ilsa, Renault is puzzled: “Miss Lund, she’s very beautiful, yes, but you were never interested in any woman.” After what happened in Paris, Rick uses women for sex but will not allow himself to become emotionally engaged. Yvonne is the kind of woman who seems safe, but she falls for him, and he must push her away.

Perhaps the most striking change in Rick is his transformation from a political idealist who fought against the fascists into “a very cynical person” (Ugarte) who “is completely neutral about everything” (Renault) and who keeps proclaiming that he will

“stick [his] neck out for nobody.” Why does feeling jilted by Ilsa destroy Rick’s political idealism? His cynicism seems to be part of a massive withdrawal from any form of involvement that would make him feel vulnerable. If he doesn’t care about anything, he can’t be hurt. Before, he had opened himself to his feelings and had hopes and dreams not only for himself but also for a better world. Now, he is trying to shut himself down, to believe in nothing, to anesthetize himself. There are repeated references in the screenplay to the expressionlessness of his face. In Paris, Rick was vibrant and spontaneous; now he grimly tries to keep his feelings under control. The stiffness of his demeanor and the rigidity of his defenses indicate the fragility of his psyche and the severity of his wound. One of the reasons why viewers tend to be sympathetic to Rick even when he is behaving badly is that they sense that there is a great deal of suffering beneath his tough exterior.

Rick is a sympathetic figure also because his actions often belie his cynical posture. He is beset by inner conflicts that are reflected in his inconsistent behavior. He says that he won’t stick his neck out for anyone; but he agrees to hold the letters of transit for Ugarte, at some risk to himself. He does not respond when Ugarte pleads for help as he is pursued by the police, but there is nothing he can do. Despite his professions of neutrality and of indifference to politics, Rick is clearly anti-German. He denies a wealthy German entrance to his gambling room, tears up a German check, and intervenes in a quarrel between a French and German officer by telling the German that he doesn’t like disturbances in his place, although it was the Frenchman who started the fracas. When Laszlo tells the orchestra to play the Marseillaise in order to drown out the singing of the Germans, Rick nods his go-ahead. In this highly emotional and politically significant scene, Rick is clearly taking sides. As a result of his sticking his neck out, his café is closed down.

Renault says that beneath his “cynical shell” Rick is “at heart a sentimentalist,” and he is right. The most striking example of this is Rick’s assistance to Annina and Jan, the Bulgarian newlyweds who are trying to get to America because they don’t want their children to grow up in a country where “a devil has the people by the throat.” They have had enough money to reach Casablanca but cannot afford the exit visas they need to go on from there. Renault has offered to provide the visas if Annina will sleep with him, and he sends her to Rick to confirm his trustworthiness. Deeply troubled at the thought of betraying her husband, Annina asks Rick if he could forgive a woman who did a bad thing because she loved him so much that his “happiness was the only thing she wanted in the whole world.” When Rick harshly advises her to “go back to Bulgaria,” she replies, “Oh, but if you knew what it means to us to leave Europe, to get to America!” She cannot give up the dream of freedom but is in dread of hurting her husband: “Oh, but if Jan should find out! He is such a boy.” “Yes, well,” says Rick, “everybody in Casablanca has problems.” This seems to be a callous dismissal, but Rick goes into the roulette room where Jan is trying to win money to leave and tells him what number to play, making sure that the croupier hears. Jan wins, Ilsa doesn’t have to sleep with Renault, and Rick has put himself at risk by revealing that the roulette wheel is fixed. Both thwarted and amused, Renault calls Rick a “rank sentimentalist,” while Carl and Sacha make Rick uncomfortable by fussing over him for having “done a beautiful thing.”

Despite his effort to be detached, indifferent, and uninvolved, Rick is moved by both the personal and the political aspects of Annina's plight. When Renault asks Rick why he interferes with his "little romances," Rick replies, "Put it down as a gesture to love." Annina's devotion to her husband is what Rick wishes he had for himself.

"Nobody," he tells Annina, "has ever loved me that much." He does not want her to poison her marriage and advises her to go back to Bulgaria, but she cannot give up the hope of a better life, and Rick is responsive to her dream. She is determined to get to America but is afraid of how hurt her husband would be if he found out what she had done. He is such a youthful idealist that he wouldn't understand. At this point, Rick's own pain leads him to identify with Jan; and he intervenes, enabling Annina and Jan to escape with their relationship intact. In his heart of hearts, Rick is just such a boy as Jan, whom he saves from the danger of being destroyed by a crazy world.

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There is a side of Rick we do not see until Laszlo and Ilsa appear. The film makes clear the magnitude of Laszlo's contribution to the fight against fascism. After mentioning that Laszlo is in town, Renault is struck by Rick's reaction: "this is the first time I have ever seen you so impressed." "Well," says Rick, "he's succeeded in impressing half the world." Laszlo's stature is confirmed in Renault's office the next morning. When Laszlo tells Strasser that he can't kill all the resistance fighters, that others will rise to take their place, Strasser says that "no one could take [Rick's] place" should "anything unfortunate" happen to him. Rick can make Laszlo's escape possible by selling him the letters of transit, but he adamantly refuses to do so, despite what this will mean to Laszlo and the resistance. This is not the Rick who is an object of admiration to Carl and Sasha and who is celebrated by critics for his goodness. For some reason, viewers tend not to register the ruthlessness of Rick's behavior toward Laszlo or allow it to interfere with their sense of him as a nice guy. How are we to account for Rick's readiness to be complicit in Laszlo's doom?

Rick's defenses seem to be working reasonably well, despite his inner conflicts, until Ilsa's presence in Casablanca reopens his wounds. He is trying to bury the past, to protect himself through cynicism and detachment, and to numb himself with alcohol. When Strasser asks his nationality, Rick replies that he is a drunkard, but we do not see him really intoxicated until after Ilsa appears. According to the screenplay, the sight of her is "a wallop, a shock." Traumatized again, Rick begins to fall apart. After the café closes for the night, he sits drinking, wallowing in misery and waiting for Ilsa to return. When Ilsa tries to explain what happened in Paris, he treats her like a whore, asking if Laszlo was the man for whom she left him or if there were others in between. Ilsa leaves the café in disgust.

Rick apologizes for his behavior when they meet in the market the next day, blaming his drunken state; but Ilsa refuses to continue her explanation: "Last night I saw what has happened to you. The Rick I knew in Paris, I could tell him. He'd understand. But the one who looked at me with such hatred . . .". Ilsa senses that Rick is implacable and that nothing she says will make any difference. She is right about that. When Rick refuses to sell the letters, he knows that Laszlo had been Ilsa's husband all along; and, had he wished to be fair, he could easily have figured out that Ilsa did not know Laszlo

was alive when she was with him in Paris. But Rick continues to act as though he had been callously betrayed and to pursue his terrible revenge.

When Laszlo asks why he won't sell him the letters of transit, Rick tells him to ask his wife. Rick is motivated by his bitterness toward Ilsa, to be sure; but I think there is also another reason, of which he is less consciously aware. The comparisons he is forced to make between Laszlo and himself exacerbate his insecurities and generate a great deal of hostility. His sense of rivalry with Laszlo has a strong erotic component, for he feels that Ilsa has chosen Laszlo over him, but there is more to it than that. When they are introduced, Rick congratulates Laszlo on his "work": "Thank you," says Laszlo; "I try." "We all try," Rick replies; "You succeed." Rick has fought the good fight in Ethiopia and Spain, and then in France, we gather, at the beginning of the war; but his activities are inconsequential compared to those of Laszlo, who is presented as a person of world-historical importance on whom the fate of a great cause depends. Rick admires Laszlo but he also resents him, for his eminence makes Rick feel insignificant. Here is another blow to his already damaged pride.

There are a number of scenes in which Rick's resentment of Laszlo's stature is evident. When Ilsa returns to the café after closing time, she tries to tell Rick the story of her relationship with Laszlo:

It's about a girl who had just come to Paris from her home in Oslo. At the house of some friends she met a man about whom she'd heard her whole life, a very great and courageous man. He opened up for her a whole beautiful world full of knowledge and thoughts and ideals. Everything she knew or ever became was because of him. And she looked up to him and worshiped him with a feeling she supposed was love.

Laszlo is again presented as a world-famous man, someone about whom a young Norwegian girl had heard her whole life. He is "very great and courageous," and he opens to Ilsa a beautiful world of thoughts and ideals. This is not what Rick wants to hear. (Rick is drunk, to be sure, but it should have been evident from Ilsa's speech that she knew Laszlo before she met him and also that her feeling for Laszlo is something other than erotic love.) Rick interrupts, equating Ilsa's story with the many he has heard while visiting houses of prostitution (which tells us something about his relations with women). He deromanticizes Ilsa's tale, treating her as a loose woman and Laszlo as one of her paramours. He refuses to listen to Ilsa's praise of Laszlo and defends his pride by diminishing them both. Ilsa is trying to get Rick to understand her relationship with Laszlo; but given his vulnerability, she is saying the wrong thing—not that there is any right thing she could say. When Rick's facade of aloof self-sufficiency cracks, what emerges is a very touchy and irrational man.

Rick is capable of great generosity, as in the case of Jan and Annina, but not with Laszlo. When Laszlo approaches him about buying the letters, he begins by stressing how important it is that he get out of Casablanca: "It is my privilege to be one of the leaders of a great movement. You know what I have been doing. You know what it means to the work, to the lives of thousands and thousands of people that I be free to reach America and continue my work." According to the stage directions, Laszlo says this "simply"; and as played by Paul Henreid, he does not seem pompous or self-aggrandizing. He knows Rick's record of running guns to Ethiopia and fighting the fascists in Spain and assumes that an appeal to the importance of the cause will be

efficacious. Rick's response is extremely brusque: "I'm not interested in politics. The problems of the world are not in my department. I'm a saloon keeper." Whereas aiding the helpless Annina feeds Rick's pride, despite his apparent discomfort with the praise he receives as a result, hearing Laszlo identify himself as one of the leaders of a great movement exacerbates the wound to Rick's vanity and hardens his resolution to refuse to sell the letters. Laszlo offers Rick two hundred thousand francs, but Rick says that the answer would be the same if the offer were three million.

When Laszlo inquires why, Rick tells him to ask his wife. Retaliation against Ilsa is Rick's primary motive, no doubt; but his desire to thwart Laszlo is also a motive, I think. The two ignoble motives are interrelated, of course. Before he knows that Ilsa is with Laszlo, Rick cites Laszlo's record of eluding the Nazis and bets Renault that Laszlo will escape once again. He is delighted by Laszlo's feats and seems to be rooting for him, so that Renault feels called on to warn him against giving Laszlo assistance. Once Rick sees Laszlo and Ilsa together, his competitiveness is aroused and his attitude changes. He cannot outdo Laszlo in accomplishments or nobility, but he can destroy him. The unhappy, insecure Rick is driven to restore his sense of potency by bringing down the great man. Possessing the letters of transit gives him the power of life and death and the means to act out his venomous rage.

Rick's resentment of Laszlo surfaces again in the climactic scene that leads to his second transformation. When Ilsa comes to plead with him for the letters of transit, she begins by saying, "I know how you feel about me, but I'm asking you to put your feelings aside for something more important." Rick responds with great irritation: "Do I have to hear again what a great man your husband is? What an important cause he is fighting for?" Ilsa recognizes that she is getting nowhere, and the screenplay tells us she "deliberately takes a new approach."

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Ilsa's new approach works no better than her original one. She reminds Rick of their love in Paris, but he tells her that bringing up Paris is "poor salesmanship." She wants to tell him what really happened there, but he announces that he won't believe anything she says. Flaring up, she denounces his self-involvement, but then apologizes and says Rick is their last hope, that without his help Laszlo will die in Casablanca. Rick's indifference to Laszlo's fate leads Ilsa to draw a gun, and Rick's invitation to "go ahead and shoot" leads her to declare her love. This produces Rick's second transformation, and his behavior becomes the opposite of what it had been. As I observed at the outset, the turning point of the film and its denouement make one wonder if the behavior of Rick and Ilsa, which is so radical and so essential to the plot, is consistent with their characters. There are some confusing elements, but I think that for the most part their behavior is intelligible and that many details of Rick's actions toward the end can be understood in the light of his competitiveness with Laszlo.

The most crucial moment in the film occurs when Rick tells Ilsa to go ahead and shoot. It is possible that he really wants her to shoot and is being suicidal. His saying that she'd be doing him a favor implies that she'll be saving him from an unbearable existence or from the trouble of killing himself. Whether he wants her to kill him or not, his words are an expression of despair, of his feeling that his life is not worth living.



Rick feels this way partly because Ilsa has chosen Laszlo over him. He was euphoric in Paris when he had her love and was devastated after he felt that she had rejected him. Learning that Laszlo is and was Ilsa's husband has not helped because now he feels that he has lost her to a better man. What he is saying to her, in effect, is that the only way you can get the letters of transit is to shoot me, and you won't stop at doing that because "Laszlo and the cause mean so much to you." If they mean everything and I mean nothing, I don't want to live.

I think another source of Rick's despair, of his indifference to life, is that he hates himself for the way he has been acting but is unable to change. Although he seems unconflicted and unrelenting in his vindictiveness, he needs to be noble, as he has been in the past; and he cannot be comfortable with the course his anger has driven him to take. If he persists in his refusal to help Laszlo, he will have satisfied his spite; but he'll be a villain in the eyes of a great many people and in his own eyes as well. He cannot transcend his hurt pride, but he cannot restore it by subverting the cause for which he has fought. If Laszlo is imprisoned or killed, how will Rick live with himself after that?

Rick's telling Ilsa to go ahead and shoot is the turning point of the film because of the way Ilsa responds. When she tells Rick how much she loved him, and loves him still, she restores his pride and makes it possible for him to become magnanimous to Laszlo. How to explain Ilsa's reaction to Rick's extreme behavior? The film seems to offer two possible scenarios: that she is saying what she has to say in order to obtain the letters, or that Rick's despair evokes her love.

The first scenario is suggested by the scene between Ilsa and Laszlo just before Ilsa goes to plead for the letters. Laszlo lets Ilsa know that he sympathizes with her situation in Paris and assures her that he loves her very much. "Yes. Yes, I know," says Ilsa. "Victor, whatever I do, will you believe that I, that . . .". "You don't even have to say it," says Laszlo, "I'll believe." There appears to be a tacit understanding here that Ilsa will try to get the letters from Rick and that she may have to employ sexual means to do so. She is asking Laszlo to believe that she loves him no matter what, and he says that he will. The interaction between Laszlo and Ilsa seems to be a variation on the Jan-Annina story, except that Laszlo is not a boy. He is an idealist but also a man of the world with sophisticated attitudes toward sex and a readiness to accept the harsh realities of life.

As we have seen, Ilsa tries several approaches to getting the letters, including threatening Rick with a gun. Shooting him would not be a good solution, even if she could bring herself to do it, for this would result in her arrest. Now desperate, Ilsa plays her last card by telling Rick that she loves him. She says that she "tried to stay away," indicating that she is there because her attraction to him is irresistible. This is not the reason she came to see him, of course, and the falsity of the statement suggests that she telling him what she knows he wants to hear. When she says that she'll "never have the strength to leave" him again, Rick asks about Laszlo. "Oh, you'll help him now, Richard, won't you? You'll see that he gets out? Then he'll have his work, all that he's been living for." Ilsa's mission has been accomplished. By professing her love for Rick, she has assured her husband's escape.

Another possibility is that Ilsa is sincere about loving Rick and is prepared to abandon Laszlo, provided he will be saved? That is the impression with which we are left by what happens at the airport. In the climactic scene of the film, Ilsa tells Rick that

she can't run away from him again, that she "wish[es she] didn't love [him] so much," but that she "can't fight it anymore." She says she doesn't "know what's right any longer" and asks Rick to think for all of them. Rick agrees to do so and devises a plan to free Laszlo, who has been taken into custody, and to send him off to Lisbon, whence he can depart for America. Ilsa's understanding is that Laszlo will get on the plane and that she will remain with Rick. When Rick tells Renault to write "Mr. and Mrs. Victor Laszlo" on the letters of transit, Ilsa looks at him "with astonishment" and is "dazed." When his "intention fully dawns on her," she asks "what has happened" to him since the previous night; and when Rick explains that they'd both wind up in a concentration camp if she remained, she replies, "You're saying this only to make me go." Rick then gives her a lecture on how she is part of Laszlo's work and how she'd regret it the rest of her life if she did not accompany him. Ilsa's response is to ask, "But what about us?" She seems genuinely disappointed that she won't be staying with Rick, so perhaps her professions of love are sincere.

I don't think it is possible to choose between the two scenarios I have described—the film begins with one and then switches to the other. The only way of integrating them is to see Ilsa as initially trying to manipulate Rick and then really falling for him again. If that is what the film was aiming at, the transition was not made very clear; and the total effect is confusing, I think.

If one regards Ilsa's professions of love as sincere, then one must ask why Rick's inviting her to shoot him affects her as it does. One explanation might be that Rick's despair makes Ilsa see how deeply he has been hurt and how important she is to him—indeed, that may have been the message he was trying to give. She has already indicated that she initially mistook her veneration of Laszlo for love, and she seems to be more erotically attracted to Rick than she is to her husband. Perhaps Ilsa's romantic feelings for Rick are intensified by his dependency.

In this scenario, Ilsa is drawn not to the stronger but to the weaker man, a not uncommon phenomenon in the relations between the sexes. She is proud of Laszlo, but Rick's desperate need of her makes her feel important. No matter what happens, Laszlo remains self-possessed and resourceful, whereas Rick is bitter and sulky, torn by turbulent emotions, so miserable he doesn't want to live. Laszlo loves Ilsa and is prepared to make great sacrifices for her, but he is not consumed by jealousy and desire, and his feelings lack the neurotic intensity of Rick's. He can contemplate with equanimity both Ilsa's affair in Paris and her readiness to do whatever it takes to get the letters. Rick is devastated by what he interprets as her desertion of him for another man. By telling Ilsa to go ahead and shoot, Rick is forcing her to choose between himself and Laszlo. If she chooses Rick, Laszlo will be OK; if she chooses Laszlo, Rick will be destroyed. It is the needier man who tugs at her emotions, feeds her pride, and wins her emotional support.

Like Ilsa, viewers seem to prefer the insecure Rick to the self-confident Laszlo. From the perspective of the audience, perhaps the contest is between a character who seems to be a flesh and blood human being—capable of suffering, error, and redemption—and a quasi-mythical, seemingly invulnerable hero who understands and forgives all. Laszlo gets on Rick's nerves because he is such a towering figure, one with whom an ordinary man cannot compete. Perhaps he gets on the audience's

nerves as well. Many people love Rick, whereas Laszlo has few admirers, despite the fact that he more consistently embodies the values of the film.

Ilsa's profession of love changes everything for Rick. It restores his sense of potency and worth, not only because it alleviates his sense of rejection, but also because it gives him a competitive triumph over Laszlo, the man whose superiority has been making him feel small. When faced with a decision, Ilsa has chosen him. She had looked up to Laszlo as a great and courageous man who taught her everything she knew. Now she says she no longer knows what is right, and she asks Rick "to think for both of us, for all of us." She places Laszlo as well as herself in Rick's hands. It is now Rick, not Laszlo, to whom she looks for guidance. He has become the dominant member of the triangle.

Rick agrees to think for all of them, and the plan he forms is profoundly influenced by the conversation with Laszlo that immediately follows his scene with Ilsa. Laszlo has returned to the café with Carl, after having been injured escaping the police raid on the meeting of the underground.

RICK. Don't you sometimes wonder if it's worth all this? I mean what you're fighting for?

LASZLO. We might as well question why we breathe. If we stop breathing, we'll die. If we stop fighting our enemies, the world will die.

RICK. What of it? Then it'll be out of its misery.

This is still the cynical Rick who has not yet relinquished his defensive detachment. Laszlo says that Rick sounds "like a man who's trying to convince himself of something he doesn't believe in his heart." "I wonder if you know," he continues, "that you're trying to escape from yourself and that you'll never succeed." Having seen Rick's ambivalence during his cynical phase, we know that Laszlo is right; but Laszlo's words would have little effect if Rick had not received a declaration of love from Ilsa.

What most influences Rick in this scene is Laszlo's asking him to use the letters of transit to take Ilsa away from Casablanca. He explains that he knew there was something between Rick and Ilsa when he saw them together the first evening. He demands no explanation because "no one is to blame." They are both in love with the same woman; and since Rick won't sell him the letters of transit, he wants Rick to use them to take Ilsa away with him. Rick "looks at Laszlo incredulously" and then asks, "You love her that much?" "Yes," replies Laszlo, "I love her that much." This is another variation on the Jan-Annina story, another highly romantic readiness to sacrifice for love.

Rick doesn't know it, of course, but there have been other instances of Laszlo's gallantry. When Ferrari says that it will take a miracle to get him out of Casablanca, Laszlo proposes that Ilsa leave without him. She refuses, reminding Laszlo that, despite the danger to himself, he stayed with her when she had trouble getting out of Lille and was sick in Marseilles. "Why didn't you leave me then?" she asks. Laszlo replies that he loves her very much (we never hear Ilsa declare her love for Laszlo). Many people in this film have been behaving nobly, with Rick as a notable exception so far.

Laszlo's effort to save his wife by sending her off with his rival inspires Rick to outdo him by developing his plan to free Laszlo from prison and help him escape with Ilsa. He tells Renault that Laszlo can be rearrested on a more serious charge and that

he, Rick, will be leaving with Ilsa. In accepting this plan, Renault seems to have forgotten that Rick cannot return to America. Rick tells Ilsa that Laszlo will use one of the letters of transit while they remain together in Casablanca. This could not work, of course, after Rick forces Renault at gun point. Rick and Ilsa are doomed to be star-crossed lovers separated by the craziness of the world in which they live.

Ilsa seems frustrated at first, but things are working out beautifully for Rick. There is no practical way he can have Ilsa, but he no longer seems to need her concrete presence in his life. Once he feels that she loves him, he can let her go, contenting himself with the memory of what they had in Paris. He can give up his vendetta, which would have destroyed him had he carried it out, and finally be at peace with himself. Instead of being the villain of the piece, he will be the hero.

Indeed, Rick assumes a mantle of nobility, lecturing Ilsa on how she belongs with Laszlo because she is part of his work and how she'd always regret it if she did not go with him. Ilsa had scorned Rick for thinking only of his own feelings with so much at stake. Now he turns the tables by assuming the morally superior position. It is not he but she who is blinded by personal feeling. He instructs her on the importance of the cause and the necessity of sacrifice: "Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that. Not now." I find this immensely condescending, much more pontifical than Laszlo has ever been. Rick reduces Laszlo to one of the "little people," like him; and he treats Ilsa as a short-sighted, love-sick female, deficient in understanding. All this is very pride-restoring.

Rick's saying that he is "no good at being noble" strikes a false note, it seems to me. He knows he is being noble and is intoxicated by his gallantry—as is the audience, including me when I am under the spell of the movie's rhetoric and don't look closely at what is happening. Laszlo welcomes him back to the fight, saying that this time he knows "our side will win," as though we can't lose now that Rick has rejoined the team. Rick explains to Ilsa that he, too, has "a job to do," one that she "can't be any part of." There is no place for a woman in the manly work he'll be doing. It is difficult to know what job Rick has in mind, for his prospect at this point is to be arrested by Renault after the plane departs. Ilsa's parting words are, "Goodbye, Rick. God bless you." She is deeply moved at how wonderfully good Rick has been.

Roger Ebert says that Rick's speech to Laszlo at the airport is "one of the nicest things he does" in the movie (DVD commentary). When Laszlo asks if everything is in order, Rick replies that there is something he should know before he leaves. "Sensing what is coming," Laszlo says that he's not asking Rick "to explain anything." Despite this, Rick proceeds to tell Laszlo that Ilsa had come to him the night before, looking for the letters: "She tried everything to get them, and nothing worked. She did her best to convince me that she was still in love with me, but that was all over long ago. For your sake, she pretended it wasn't, and I let her pretend." Laszlo says, "I understand." But what does Laszlo understand? And how are we to understand Rick's motives for saying these things?

Laszlo's lack of interest in explanations suggests that he is ready to live with whatever Ilsa may have done to obtain the letters of transit. Rick says that his explanation "may make a difference [to Laszlo] later on." That, presumably, is what is nice about it. But is it nice for Rick to tell Laszlo that Ilsa had come to him for the letters,

when he thinks that Laszlo didn't know anything about her visit? Having provided this unwanted information, Rick then says that, for Laszlo's sake, Ilsa pretended to be in love with him and he let her pretend. Why is it better for Laszlo to be told this than not to know about Ilsa's visit at all? What kind of difference will this misinformation make to Laszlo later on?

It seems to me that Rick is trying to do something for himself in this scene, rather than something for Laszlo. Isn't he saying that he is giving Ilsa and Laszlo the letters without having taken advantage of Ilsa's pretended affection for him, that he is no Captain Renault, exchanging exit visas for sexual favors. He wouldn't need to assure Laszlo that the love between him and Ilsa was over long ago if he hadn't brought up the subject of Ilsa's visit in the first place. Rick doesn't think Ilsa was pretending, of course; but he wants to present both himself and Ilsa as having behaved nobly, with Laszlo as their beneficiary. Rick is polishing his own gallant image at Laszlo's expense. All this is in keeping, I think, with Rick's psychology. One of the most interesting characters in film, he is a very complicated guy.

Casablanca has what Rick would call a "wow finish." It had seemed that Laszlo was trapped, but Rick's second transformation makes his escape possible. It is not only Laszlo who is saved but also Rick; for by helping Laszlo, Rick escapes the self-contempt and despair from which he has been suffering and that would have become more severe had he been the instrument of Laszlo's destruction. In one sense he loses Ilsa again because she leaves with Laszlo, but in another he regains her because they now have Paris once more. By giving her up, moreover, he becomes as noble as Laszlo, if not nobler. As the great exemplar of romantic chivalry and sacrifice, he becomes a quasi-mythical figure, like Laszlo, but more lovable. The movie stops just in time, before his new pomposity and condescension become offensive even to a casual viewer.

After Rick's transformation, the remaining blocking forces are removed, and everyone is fine except for the odious Strasser. There is a certain amount of plot manipulation, to be sure, but the principals remain in character. Renault tries to thwart Rick's plan by telephoning Strasser rather than the airport, but this works out well because it leads to Strasser's death, which is very satisfying. Instead of getting Rick into more trouble, his shooting of Strasser sets him free. Renault had planned to arrest him after Laszlo's departure—Rick had no exit strategy for himself, part of his sticking-his-neck-out heroics; but the killing of Strasser puts Renault in a precarious position, and he didn't like Vichy and the Germans anyway. So Rick escapes criminal prosecution, as he and Renault go off to join the Free French at Brazzaville. He has a new friend in Louis, and Ilsa couldn't have joined him anyway. The ending is a wish fulfillment fantasy for Rick and a delight for the audience.