

City Lights Film Summary

City Lights by Charlie Chaplin

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Context

Charles Spencer Chaplin, the writer, producer, director, and editor of *City Lights*, was born in Walworth, London on April 16, 1899. His father was a music hall singer who, early in Chaplin's life, divorced his mother and subsequently, provided no support, financial or otherwise for either him or his older, half-brother, Sidney. Chaplin credited much of his success to his mother, Hannah, whom he loved dearly. She had been a stage actor, but evidently lost her ability to perform, but managed to earn a subsistence living for Chaplin and his brother by sewing. Unfortunately, Hannah slowly succumbed to mental illness and was often confined to an asylum for short periods of time by the time Charlie was seven years old. Charlie and Sidney were relegated to a workhouse for orphaned and abandoned children, until Hannah returned home from her first confinement. During one of Hannah's later stays at the asylum, Charlie lived with his alcoholic father and his stepmother in a very strained environment.

By the time Charlie was nine years old, he had his first taste of stage life when he began touring with a stage company, the 8 Lancashire Lads, and a kindhearted couple who led the troupe. This was where he first met Stan Laurel, who was also part of the troupe. By the time he was twelve, Charlie's father was dead, and at age fourteen, his mother was again readmitted to the asylum and Charlie attempted to provide for himself the best he could, desperate to avoid returning to the workhouse. His brother, Sydney, was out of town, touring with an acting company. When Sydney returned, Charlie's luck took a distinct turn for the better and he won parts in various productions, one of which was a stage adaptation of a Sherlock Holmes' play. Both parts brought rave reviews and Charlie toured with the company, performing his part in the Sherlock Holmes' adaptation for nearly a year. His mother, Hannah, was released from the asylum and everything seemed to be going well, until Charlie turned sixteen. Hannah relapsed and was institutionalized for the next seven years.

Charlie continued his acting career, touring the United States' vaudeville circuit with the Karno troupe. Two years later, in 1912, Charlie decided to return to the United States to live, leaving the stage to join Mack Sennett's Keystone Films and marking a milestone in his own life and in the history of film. Although Charlie started at Keystone as a bit player, the introduction of his now famous Tramp character quickly changed him into a major star. At the young age of twenty-five, Chaplin had appeared in more than eight films and began directing his first film, "Twenty Minutes of Love."

Chaplin signed on with several other studios until he finally began building a studio of his own in 1917. By this time, he had completed the filming of approximately fifteen shorts. Chaplin began facing great turmoil at this time, shortly after his first marriage to Mildred Harris, in 1918. In 1919, Charlie's and Mildred's infant child is born, horribly deformed, and dies within three days. Seeking solace in his work, Chaplin only further alienated Mildred and the relationship struggled even more.

That same year, Chaplin formed United Artists with his closest friend Douglas Fairbanks and Fairbank's wife, screen legend Mary Pickford. Their intention in forming United



Artists was to keep the major studios from monopolizing and controlling all aspects of film production. At the same time, Chaplin was working on something new and in 1921, *The Kid* is finally released to great office box success and unanimous praise. Chaplin's first full-length movie, *The Kid* secured his reputation as a living legend and although it took over a year to produce, it was a huge artistic and financial success.

Chaplin next took his first vacation and returned to work in the United States with his mother, where she lived the rest of her life under the best medical care money could provide. By this time, his marriage to Mildred Harris had ended in one of the bitterest Hollywood divorces seen up to this point.

Chaplin continued with the production of several films, the most significant of which was *The Gold Rush*, considered one of the classics of the silent era. Early in the filming, Chaplin's leading lady Lita Grey, had to be replaced by Georgia Hale. Chaplin had married Lita Grey and she had become pregnant; she was sixteen at the time. In 1925, Charles Spencer Chaplin, Jr. was born and *The Gold Rush* was also released to critical acclaim and financial success.

In 1926, Charlie and Lita's marriage broke up, bitterly and publicly. Charges were made back and forth, all eagerly displayed in the newspapers. The divorce finally ended a year later with a record-breaking divorce settlement of almost one million dollars. Chaplin kept producing films and in 1928, *The Circus* was released. Another huge and successful film, Chaplin received an Oscar for his work on the film as a director, actor, and producer.

By the end of the year, Chaplin had started working on *City Lights*, which was finally released in 1931 as his first non-silent film. A musical soundtrack was included and sound effects were used. However, it was still not a "talking" picture, which was a major gamble, as sound pictures had become the standard. *City Lights* proved to be a rewarding success and many believe it to be Chaplin's best film.



Summary and Analysis

City Lights begins with the scene (shown with a quick subtitle) "Peace and Prosperity" to introduce the character of the Tramp, satirically mock the proceedings of a public presentation, and more subtly, to make a statement against talking films. An ugly monument is unveiled before a dignified, civic group. A typical, boring speech is presented by the mayor. Chaplin uses instruments to parody the voices and make fun of talking films and the characters. Imitating the monotone intonation of the mayor's speech is a series of unintelligible squawks and squeaks. A female civic leader is next in line to speak, also represented by a similar garble and squawking, with a higher feminine register. When the sheet is lifted, the Tramp in tattered attire is revealed, sleeping peacefully in the central figure's lap. The crowd is appalled.

The Tramp slowly awakens and once he realizes he has a rather disapproving audience, he attempts to get down from the statute as quickly as possible. However, his pants get stuck on one of the statutes and when the Star Spangled Banner begins to play, the Tramp attempts to take off his hat and stand at full attention, but finds this feat impossible since his footing is unsure. At the end of the scene, as he crawls off the large statute, his nose is next to the statute's huge, outspread hand which creates an image of the Tramp's nose-thumbing gesture, which makes for a perfect image of Chaplin's disdain for the ceremony at hand and talking pictures metaphorically.

The next scene, "Afternoon Stroll," finds the Tramp being taunted by two newspaper boys who make fun of his shabby clothing. After reprimanding the boys, the Tramp continues down the busy sidewalk, stopping in front of a shop window to gawk at a female, nude statue. Although he wants nothing more than to stare at the statue to satisfy his preoccupation, he attempts to be discreet by acting as if he is a great lover of art. He steps forward, backward, and sideways, pretending to find exactly the right perspective. At this point, he has forgotten the newspaper boys who continue to harass him by spitting pellets. The entire scene foreshadows the Tramp's obsession with the blind girl; a preoccupation that becomes so overwhelming, he is willing to ignore all possible consequences of his actions, as long as he finds a way to help the blind girl.

In "The Flower Girl," the Tramp is approached by the blind girl who is selling flowers. Not realizing she is blind, he begins flirting with her, but when she drops a flower and attempts to retrieve it, he discovers she is blind and is immediately smitten with her. He gives her the last coin he has for the flower and then sits down a good distance from her, to watch as she goes about her routine of selling flowers. As soon as the Tramp walks away, purposely failing to take his change, the blind girl hears the slamming of a limousine and assumes the Tramp is a rich millionaire. When she goes home that evening, the flower girl turns on the Victrola and dreams of the next visit from her rich millionaire.

"Night of Adventure" places the Tramp in a position where he must either watch the suicide of an eccentric millionaire, drunk and depressed after a breakup with his wife, or attempt to stop him and convince him he has a reason to go on living. The Tramp



stumbles on the millionaire at the harbor who has tied one end of a rope to a large stone and put the other end, twisted into a noose, around his neck. The Tramp gives him his best advice: "Tomorrow the birds will sing" and "Be brave! Face life!" However, the millionaire is not convinced and the Tramp valiantly intervenes to save him. Somehow, both end up in the water and the millionaire ultimately saves the Tramp. Regardless, the millionaire claims he is "cured" and that the Tramp is his friend for life.

In the next few scenes, "The Mansion," "Out on the Town," and "Homeward Bound,"

the Tramp and his new friend visit the millionaire's elegant mansion and at the suggestion of the millionaire, they dress up for a night on the town and finally, head back to the mansion early the next morning. In "Come In, Get Out, Come In," the millionaire gives his limo to the Tramp to keep and gives the Tramp money to buy flowers from the blind girl. The Tramp gives her \$10 for the whole basket and offers her a ride home in his new automobile. This only confirms her belief that she is being courted by a rich man.

The Tramp returns to the millionaire's mansion in the limo for "This Time, Stay Out," but every time the millionaire sobers up, he remembers nothing of the events that occurred while he was inebriated, including his friendship with the Tramp. The millionaire is surprised to see the Tramp in his car; he quickly shoos him away and the millionaire drives off in his limo.

In "Daydreams," the blind girl tells her grandmother, whom she lives with, about her millionaire friend who brought her home in his car. The grandmother replies that he must be wealthy and the blind girl insists: "Yes, but he's more than that."

"That Afternoon" is one in which the Tramp once again encounters the drunk millionaire who, due to his altered state, immediately recognizes his friend, again. The millionaire throws a huge party in honor of the Tramp and in "The Morning After," finds himself sharing a warm double bed with the Tramp the next morning. Sober, the millionaire immediately has his butler throw the Tramp out onto the street. The Tramp goes to the street corner where the blind girl sells flowers, but she is not there. He goes to her home, looks through the window, and sees her in bed, attended by a doctor. He, dejectedly, sits down on the stairs, feeling helpless.

The tramp takes a job as a street cleaner in "Determined to Help," sweeping up manure on the city streets. At lunchtime he goes to visit the blind girl, who is now recovering from her illness and anticipating his visit. Her grandmother leaves the apartment to sell flowers and allow the two some privacy. In "Playing the Gentleman," the Tramp reads a newspaper article about a doctor in town who can cure blindness. The blind girl exclaims, "Wonderful, then I'll be able to see you." The Tramp hesitates, realizing the gift of sight may cause him great loss. Next, he finds an envelope lying on the table and the blind girl asks him to read it to her. The letter is a note of eviction stating they will be thrown out if the \$22 rent is not received by tomorrow. The girl begins crying, but the tramp promises he will pay it first thing in the morning. Unfortunately, he loses his job when he returns to work, as his boss yells, "You're late for the last time."



The Tramp enters a fixed boxing contest in an effort to earn the rent money in "That Night." The plan is for neither fighter to get hurt, and they split the purse 50-50. Everything goes awry when the opponent he has worked out the agreement with is warned by telegram that the cops are after him. He runs off and is replaced by a massive, muscle-bound substitute who refuses to go along with the previous agreement. The boxing match that ensues is a funny, choreographed ballet that is memorable in its comic originality. Eventually, the Tramp is knocked out cold.

In the next scene, "Still Hoping," the Tramp is wandering the sidewalks, trying to come up with a solution to help the girl. He stumbles across the millionaire who is just returning from Europe and since he is drunk, he immediately recognizes the Tramp, embraces him, and takes him home to his mansion. The Tramp tells the millionaire about the blind girl he is trying to help and the millionaire promises to take care of her. They enter the mansion's living room, unaware that there are two robbers hiding behind the draperies. True to his word, the millionaire gives the Tramp \$1000.00, but as soon as he has the money in his pocket, the burglars appear. They knock the millionaire out with a blackjack. When the Tramp runs to call the police, the robbers flee. This is the climax of the film.

The blow sobers the millionaire up, so as he comes to, the police have arrived and the millionaire accuses the Tramp of robbing him. Having just pocketed the money given to him by the millionaire, the Tramp looks guilty and being unable to convince anyone of his innocence, he realizes he must steal the money that was given to him only a few minutes before. He grabs the money and runs to the girl, putting the \$1000 in her hand for the operation for her eyes and the rent. He then tells her he will be going away for a while. The Tramp is soon picked up and arrested for the robbery, on a nearby street corner. He is sentenced to nine months in jail for his crime.

In "Hope is Renewed," it is Autumn and the Tramp is released from jail. He is ambling down the street, seemingly defeated by the prison experience, and looking for the flower girl in her familiar, sidewalk location. He is soon the target of the newspaper boys' ridicule and is pelted by their pea-shooter, once again. The Tramp bends down to retrieve a discarded rose in the gutter. The boys use this opportunity to grab a piece of his shirt-tail, sticking out through a hole in the seat of his ragged pants, and tear it off. The Tramp snatches the rag back and pursues the boys for a moment, before folding the rag into a handkerchief and placing it in his pocket.

The flower girl and her grandmother now own the prosperous flower shop on the street corner. A millionaire enters the flower shop to make a purchase. As he exits, she tells her grandmother ..."I thought he had returned." The girl has been longing for her savior, expecting him as he had told her he would be away for a while. The girl, whose sight has been restored, thanks to the Tramp, watches the incident with the newspaper boys and giggles at the comic/tragic figure. The Tramp sees the girl he loves and sacrificed himself for through the shop window and he is transfixed with wonder. He beams at her and the girl turns to her grandmother, laughingly commenting that she has an admirer.



The tramp, realizing she can now see him for what he really is, tries to walk away and evade the girl. However, she quits laughing and pitying him, and decides to try to help him. She calls for him and outside the shop. She gives him a white rose to replace the wilted one he picked up from the gutter. As an act of charity, she gives him a coin she has taken from the shop's register, pressing the money into his hand. Suddenly, her acute sense of touch reminds her of the familiar feel of his hands. She runs her hand up the arm of his coat and is certain this is her mysterious benefactor. The girl is dismayed and confused, since he looks so completely different from what she expected.

The emotionally intense scene is captured by the camera's close-up of both their faces. The emotions the Tramp is feeling are effectively portrayed, from shame to fear, bravery, pain, apprehension, love, and joy. Once she gets over her confusion, she is obviously touched. The Tramp's eyes light up when she obviously recognizes and *accepts* him for who he is.

The cards finish the story in one of the classic climaxes in all of cinema history. The flower girl says, "You?" and the Tramp nods, pointing to his eyes, "You can see now?"

She nods and smiles, widely, "Yes, I can see now." She grasps his hand to her breast. The Tramp stands frozen as he holds his finger to his mouth, putting the flower she has just given him between his teeth. This encounter reveals them in the complete opposite social roles-in her eyes, he has changed from a millionaire to a vagabond, an impoverished Tramp. She has changed from a poor, blind girl into a prosperous, beautiful woman who can now see-all due to his love and sacrifice. She can now see

through his pretense; she sees him as he really is and there is truly nothing else to be said. The heaven-like gleaming of the Tramp's radiant, smiling face is the last image before a fade to black.



Characters

A Blind Girl, played by Virginia Cherill

Description

The blind girl is a beautiful, young woman who lives with her grandmother in what appears to be a small, rented apartment. They are very poor and the girl sells flowers everyday on the street corner, to make end meet. She spends a great deal of time dreaming, dreaming of a rich millionaire who will find her, love her, and give her everything she has ever desired. She appears to believe, with some certainty, this will happen and greatly anticipates meeting her beloved everyday.

When she first meets the Tramp, she is blind and since she cannot see him, she assumes this is the millionaire she has been dreaming of. Everything that happens in their relationship from this point on just falls in line with the girl's dreams. The Tramp buys a flower for her and leaves in a limousine (the way she sees it). The next time she meets up with him, he buys all her flowers and takes her home in his limousine. The Tramp comes to visit her when she is ill and learns of her overdue rent. He also reads her the newspaper ad that introduces the idea of the girl having her sight restored. He returns the next morning and gives her money for the rent and money to have the eye surgery. They do not meet again until the Tramp is released from prison and the girl has had her sight restored.

Analysis

The blind girl seems to be a good person, in general. She is kind and thoughtful to everyone. She seems to be good to her grandmother who is older; the girl comes home and waters the flowers daily and takes care of the apartment as necessary. She does seem to spend a good deal of time dreaming of a better life. Considering the fact that they are very poor, this is mostly understandable. She is a hard worker. This is shown by the fact that she always shows up on the street corner to sell her flowers and later, when she is the owner of the flower shop, she is constantly busy at the shop.

The blind girl is young and naïve. She expects to meet a millionaire to love her and take care of all her needs and wants, and this is certainly the typical thoughts of a beautiful, youthful woman in the 1930's, when the film was made. Since this vision of a handsome millionaire occupies her thoughts, that is what she assumes she has found in the Tramp.

Once her sight is restored and she watches the Tramp chase after the newspaper boys, she teams with the boys in making fun of him and his plight in life, particularly when he sees her in the store window, smiles at her, and she turns to her grandmother to tell her she has an admirer.



However, her goodness takes over and she calls to him before he is out of the range of the shop. She hands him a fresh flower and a coin, and when she discovers that this is the "millionaire" she has been dreaming of and whose return she has been anticipating, she must sort through a range of emotions. She finally accepts him for who he is, as evidenced by the final expression on her face.

The Blind Girl's grandmother, played by Florence Lee

Description

The blind girl's grandmother is the typical, grandmotherly type who is a little heavy is stature and has her gray hair in a bun at the nape of her neck. She wears a long dress and a shawl and appears to love her granddaughter dearly. Even though she does not have enough money to even pay the rent, she doesn't hesitate to call a doctor when her granddaughter falls ill. She seemingly wants only her granddaughter's happiness, as she takes the flowers and sells them herself when her granddaughter is ill and when she is expecting company, wanting to provide her granddaughter and the "millionaire" the privacy they desire. She is always supportive of her granddaughter and is a diligent worker in the flower shop that they later come to own.

Analysis

An Eccentric Millionaire, played by Harry Myers

Description

The eccentric millionaire is first seen at the harbor where he has decided to end his life. He is drunk and depressed because his wife has left him and seeing no reason to go on living, he attends the harbor with a rope whose one end is wrapped around his neck (in a perfectly tied noose) and the other end, he has carefully tied to a large, heavy rock. The tramp finds him and rescues him, convincing him that there is still much to live for. The millionaire takes the tramp to his home and befriends him.

The millionaire is a very generous, congenial friend to the Tramp, as long as he is drunk. Unfortunately, as soon as he is sober, he has no memory whatsoever of the events that took place while he was drunk. Thus, he has no memory of his friendship with the tramp, nor the fact that he stopped him from committing suicide, twice.



Analysis

The Eccentric Millionaire's Butler, played by Al Earnest Garcia

Description

The eccentric millionaire's butler is insignificant, other than the fact that he does not like the Tramp and is continually throwing him out the door, whenever possible. The first night the millionaire brings the Tramp home, he tells the millionaire that his wife has been by the mansion to collect her belongings which only serves to make the millionaire regress back into his depression. The purpose for telling the millionaire such news is unclear. He seems to purposely want to upset the millionaire.

On the first night the Tramp meets the millionaire, they go out on the town and return in the early morning. The butler refuses to let the tramp back inside the mansion. The next time the Tramp meets up with the millionaire, the Tramp ends up in the same bed as the millionaire the following morning and the butler again throws him out, since the millionaire has sobered up by morning and no longer recognizes his friend. Lastly, the Tramp is at the millionaire's home when he is given over \$1000 to help the blind girl. Robbers attack the millionaire and when the Tramp runs to call the police, the robbers flee, leaving the Tramp to take the blame. By then, the millionaire has sobered up after being knocked out by the robbers' blackjack and finally coming to, just in time to agree with the butler that the Tramp had to have stolen the money the police find in his pocket.

Analysis

A Prizefighter, played by Hank Mann

Description

Prior to meeting up with the somewhat deranged millionaire the last time, the Tramp has just lost his job as a street cleaner and is trying desperately to come up with the money for the blind girl's rent. He is accosted by a prizefighter who asks him if he wants to make some easy money. Naturally, the Tramp goes along. The deal is he and the prizefighter will split the money 50/50, neither will actually win and neither will get hurt in the ring. The prizefighter has to leave suddenly when he finds out he is being pursued by the cops, leaving the Tramp to face a *real* opponent.



Analysis

A Tramp, played by Charles Chaplin

Description

The Tramp was Charlie Chaplin's signature character and appeared in more than fifty shorts and regular films. Called "the little fellow" by Chaplin, himself, the character is still universally recognized, some sixty years after his last appearance. Some critics believe Chaplin's costume for the Tramp character personified shabby gentility or the fallen aristocrat at grips with poverty, so prevalent in society at that time. He wears a tight jacket, baggy trousers, oversized shoes, a bowler hat, and carries a cane. The cane is perhaps a symbol of attempted dignity. The Tramp is a contradiction: a vagrant with the refined manners and dignity of a gentleman. Thus, he could be identified with by people from different ends of the social spectrum. He has a square mustache above his upper lip and his walk is in a waddling, penguin-like style. He is relatively small in stature which adds to his cute appearance and makes him more loveable.

In his autobiography, Chaplin tells how the character of the Tramp was born. He claims he was on the way to the dressing room and was thinking of a character of contradiction and had in mind the outfit of the tight-fitting jacket, oversized shoes, derby hat, baggy pants and cane. Chaplin stated that once he donned the outfit and the makeup, he began to feel the person he was; he began to know him and by the time he walked on stage, he was fully born. Although the major details may have been born at that moment, The Tramp changed over time from a jaunty, slapstick stereotype into a compassionate human figure that audiences throughout the world came to love. The Tramp represents indestructible individuality triumphing over adversity and persecution. The *refined* Tramp was "many-sided---a tramp, a gentleman, a poet, a dreamer, a lonely fellow always hopeful of romance and adventure..." as Chaplin put it.

Analysis

The Tramp is a character of great diversity in *City Lights*. In the opening scene, he is seen as a vagrant, mocking the pompous ceremony and dedication of the city's newest statute. He soon falls head over heels in love with the flower girl who is blind and unable to see him for whom he really is. Knowing she has great faith in him and his abilities, he becomes the person she sees in her dreams. He finds a job and when that falls through, he attempts to earn the prize money at a boxing match. Even this failure does not keep him from going on, ever hopeful that he will find a way to pay the blind girl's rent and acquire the money necessary to have her sight restored.

The Tramp finally stumbles on the amnesiac millionaire and believes he has lucked out since he is once again, drunk and remembers their friendship. When it appears that will fall through, he is out of time and luck, so he takes the money and runs to give it to the girl. He gladly sacrifices his freedom for the girl, going to prison for the "crime" of



stealing the money he was given by the millionaire. The Tramp loves the blind girl enough to put her needs first, knowing that giving her the money to have her sight restored will allow her to see him for who he truly is....and knowing she will most likely want nothing to do with him once she realizes he is not the millionaire she has seen in her dreams. To love someone enough to sacrifice all that you have and all that has been perceived, for their betterment is a character of great depth. The Tramp's sacrifices make him a character not many can live up to in everyday life.

The Tramp is a savior, in the classical sense. He is ridiculed and made fun of by others, particularly the newspaper boys who laugh at him, mock him, and repeatedly shoot him with their pea-shooter. They even tear part of his clothing, after he is released from prison. The girl watches this incident and she, too, laughs along with the others, not knowing the Tramp is her benefactor. The Tramp saves the millionaire twice when he tries to commit suicide early in the film. He saves the girl and her grandmother from being thrown out of their home and the girl from living in permanent darkness.



Themes

Love Transforms

The Tramp is first presented as a vagrant who sleeps on statutes, has no real purpose or life plan, simply going about daily from place to place, and always finding enough food and a place to sleep, one way or another. When he meets the flower girl, he immediately falls in love and at that point, he is transformed. Although the physical conditions of his life do not immediately change, he desires to be everything she believes he is. It is not that he has any more desires for personal possessions himself, because he does not. However, he wants her to have all that she needs and even, desires. What she most desires is a rich millionaire who will meet her wants and desires. The Tramp becomes what she most desires.

The Tramp's advantage, of course, is that the blind girl cannot see who he really is. Thus, he can become what she wants, by doing whatever is necessary to get her what she needs, which at this time is the money for rent to keep the home she and her grandmother share and to somehow find the money to see that her sight is restored. He first buys a flower from the blind girl. The next time he sees her, he buys all her flowers and takes her home in a limousine. It's only natural that she assumes she is being swept off her feet by a millionaire. He gives her money to cure her blindness and money to pay her rent. He gets a job and tries to win the prize money in a boxing match. These are hardly the actions of a Tramp.

The love he feels for the girl has transformed him into what she wants him to be. Her blindness is an advantage; it gives the Tramp the opportunity to transform. If the girl had been able to see, she would never have considered a relationship with a tramp. A tramp would not fulfill her dreams, the ones she so vividly imagines everyday. Because she is blind, he is at once smitten, realizing he can be what she wants him to be. Her faith and belief in him transforms him and makes him into the manifestation of the man in her dreams. Only love has that kind of power: the power to transform.

Consequences of Association

The Tramp is typically a loner, an outcast, and an onlooker. He does not befriend many people. He is homeless and without true friends or family. His shabby appearance sets him apart and cues people to avoid and stereotype him. Everyone wants to believe a tramp is.....not one of "us." The Tramp is more of a mime, whose body language serves as speech. He exists on a different plane than the other characters. He stands outside their lives and their realities, interacting with the world mainly through his actions.

His befriending of the millionaire and his falling in love with the blind girl are extraordinary actions for the tramp. He comes to know the millionaire when he attempts to save him from suicide. The millionaire claims he is cured, but tries to commit suicide



again, once he and the Tramp get back to his mansion. The Tramp talks him out of it again and they go out on the town. Once the millionaire sobers up, the Tramp is thrown out of the mansion upon the request of the millionaire, by the butler who did not want him there in the first place. The millionaire never recognizes the Tramp when he is sober.

The next time the Tramp encounters the millionaire, he is drunk again; he throws a big party in the Tramp's honor and the next morning, when the millionaire sobers up again, the tramp is booted out of the mansion. The millionaire gives the Tramp his limousine and then, takes it back when he sobers up. Lastly, when the Tramp is in dire need of money for the girl and has tried to earn the money working and when that failed, tried to win prize money in a boxing match, he meets the millionaire, drunk again, who promises to take care of the girl. The millionaire gives the tramp over \$1000.00, but again, sobers up and claims the money was stolen from him.

The millionaire is just as "blind" as the blind girl. When he meets the Tramp, he has no will to live. The Tramp tells him, "Tomorrow the birds will sing...Be brave, face life!"

And once again, when the millionaire finds a gun when he and the Tramp get to the mansion, the Tramp talks him out of suicide. The millionaire then claims he is cured and that the Tramp is forever his friend. However, each time he sobers up, he forgets the Tramp and he is treated worse than a second class citizen. Everything he gives him, he takes away. For every nice thing he does for the Tramp, he does at least two things to prove that he is unworthy of his friendship.

The ultimate wrongdoing, of course, is his insistence that the Tramp is a thief and has stolen the money he had just given him earlier. As a result of his attachment to the millionaire and his role as savior in preventing him from suicide, the Tramp suffers; these are the consequences of his friendship with the millionaire. Attachment to the millionaire equals ridicule, belittlement, and ultimately, prison time.

When the Tramp meets the girl and discovers she is blind, he immediately falls in love with her. Each gesture he makes toward the girl gets larger. The Tramp first buys a single flower, then all of the blind girl's flowers, and lastly, gives her money for rent and the operation to restore her sight. When he first meets the girl, she is kind to everyone, but actually, lives in a dream world, ever hopeful that she will meet a millionaire who will be the love of her life. That is, indeed, what she lives for. The Tramp meets all her criteria, especially since she cannot see him. He also takes care of her, providing what she needs and literally, giving her a reason to live. Again, as a result of his association with the blind girl, the Tramp suffers. His prison sentence is the direct result of his efforts to help and save the blind girl. Had he not met the girl, the consequences would not be present.

Both characters the Tramp associates himself with lead to his further prosecution. The Tramp is further ridiculed, almost drowns, is booted out of the mansion three times, given things only to have them taken away, beaten up in a boxing match, and finally, sentenced to a nine month prison term, all as a result of his attachment to the millionaire



and the blind girl. Both are characters incapable of seeing him; both characters are in need of a reason for living for which he provides for both, and both need saved. He saves them both, but as a result, he, himself, is sacrificed and must pay the consequences.

Style and Cinematography

City Lights was released three years after talkies were introduced to movie theatres and were a great hit with the public. Chaplin was taking quite a risk when he decided to go ahead and release the silent film. He had considered revising it to a talking film, but decided it would not be an enhancement, so it was shown as originally planned. Chaplin knew what he was doing, evidently, because the film met with rave reviews.

The music played as background in *City Lights* was written by Chaplin, himself, who could not read a note of music but could play whatever he wanted, totally by sound. He was a man of many talents; he directed, produced, wrote, and edited the film. He also starred in the film as the Tramp.

Silent films were much different than those we see in theatres today. They relied on body language, expression and pantomime. Since there was no language spoken, silent films could easily be shown in many languages and Chaplin's were seen worldwide. An idea is easily conveyed by language; expressing it in mime is an art form all its own and one that was largely lost with the invention of talking movies.

The era in which *City Lights* was released was one in which silent films had previously been the norm and although there were many producers of film, Chaplin's films clearly stand apart in the areas of creativity and originality. Even today, the character of the Tramp is known and mimicked world-wide. Although Chaplin began his career early, at the age of only seven years, he soon grew weary of companies who wanted mass production at the expense of quality.

Eventually, he bought his own studio and began producing films at the pace he knew would result in excellence. He was wisely known as a perfectionist. He always walked each of his characters through each scene, and was notorious for filming up to twenty takes of the same scene just to get it right. There were over three hundred takes of the scene where he first meets the blind girl in *City Lights*. Chaplin's perfectionism paid off; his meticulous attention to every detail, along with his unquestionable talent, made him the most successful producer of his time.



Motifs

Stereotypes

In *City Lights*, there are definite divisions in social class. There are seemingly two types of social classes: the rich millionaires and the very poor. There are no middle class characters present in the film. These divisions in social class allow for the stereotypes obvious in the film. The mayor, his attending public officials, and those present for the unveiling of the statute at the beginning of the film are part of the upper, more elite class. The millionaire and all the people at the club they visit on their night on the town, except for the Tramp, are also part of the elite. The millionaire is obviously part of the elite social class.

The blind girl and her grandmother are definitely part of the lower, working class. The Tramp would typically fall into this lower class structure and does, for the most part. The Tramp is unemployed. His shabby clothes and his unkempt nature cause others to shy away from him. He has no home, no family, and no friends. He is stereotyped as a tramp because of his vagrancy and his disassociation with people.

The very rich categorize him as a tramp to ridicule him, and allow them selves to feel better about their positions in society. The extremely poor avoid the Tramp because they are afraid they will soon be in his position. The stereotype of the tramp, although frightening, makes the poor feel better since they are somehow managing to do just a little better and keep themselves from being homeless and unemployed.

The Tramp, however, does not clearly fit the stereotype of a tramp. His clothes may be a bit shabby, but he behaves like a gentleman. He has dignity and finesse, and can act appropriately in the presence of the wealthy and can also relate to the poor. He kisses the hand of the blind girl like a refined gentleman, but enters the boxing ring after making a deal with a man who has no more desire to be hurt than the Tramp does, and is no wealthier than the Tramp. He can attend a party in his honor at the mansion of a millionaire, when only the day before, he was sweeping up elephant manure in the city streets.

Thus, while the film makes distinct social divisions among the characters, causing pronounced stereotypes, the Tramp is a character of diversion. Among all the stereotypical replications of the mayor and his colleagues, the rich and the poor, the Tramp's stereotype is not so easily defined and this inability to classify him, allows the reader to consider whether stereotypes are actually valid in other cases, not only in the film, but in everyday life, as well.

The Great Depression

City Lights was released in 1931, soon after the stock market had crashed in 1929. America, and most of the world, was involved in the Great Depression. Those who felt



they had a relatively stable life found their savings wiped out, mortgages foreclosed, and fifteen million Americans were out of work.

Entertainment was greatly valued and Chaplin's films were extremely popular. His films were a reflection of the times. The blind girl sits on the corner and sells flowers is indicative of a time when any employment was good employment. The fact that her grandmother cannot fathom where the money for rent will come from, before their threatened eviction the following morning, was very real and typical of the times.

There were many homeless, hungry, unemployed people and the character of the tramp was a very realistic depiction of the position many found themselves facing during the depression. Chaplin's Tramp was shabbily dressed, but not so shabbily as to not suggest some class and dignity. His pants were baggy and his shoes were too big, but he wore a suit, carried a cane and although he had a penguin-like walk, it was a saunter in which his head was held high and always covered by a derby hat. He tipped his hat to people he encountered along the street, and conducted his affairs with manners. In other words, it is quite possible that he represented the *fallen* elite. He could have been one of many who, for one reason or another, lost his fortune to the depression.

What is most significant about Chaplin's tramp, however, is that during a time when many had lost all confidence in the future, the Tramp remained hopeful and positive. The millionaire may try to commit suicide, but the Tramp would never be seen in such a position. Regardless of circumstances, he prevailed, and his outlook for a new day was always reassuring. Thus, the Tramp represented that prevailing part of the human spirit that many needed to be reminded of during the depression.



Symbols

The Tramp as Savior

There is no doubt about the similarities between the Tramp as a savior and Jesus Christ as a savior. The Tramp, as previously stated, symbolizes hope as a figure who never condemns, always prevails, and is always there to save the person who needs saving the most. The Tramp is never defeated by failure. He refuses to look at life pessimistically and always assumes, everything will get better as soon as he rounds the next corner.

Like Christ, the Tramp is ridiculed, made fun of, shot at by boys holding pea shooters, and one of the boys even tears part of his clothing from his person, much like Christ was ridiculed and torn at, when he was placed on the cross. Also like Christ, the Tramp suddenly appears when he is most needed. He appears to save the millionaire. When the millionaire has him thrown out of his mansion, he turns the other cheek and is just as happy to see him the next time the millionaire decides to recognize him. The Tramp does not hold grudges or seek revenge. As the millionaire admits, he is "cured" by the Tramp, who has given him a reason to keep on living.

The Tramp also acts as a savior for the girl. She is blind; he makes it so she can see again. Christ also restored sight to the blind man. She, too, needs a reason to go on living, and she is certain she has found it her newfound love of the Tramp. He saves her from being homeless, and as a result of his sacrifice, she finds new life. Her sight is restored and she becomes a prominent and successful business owner.

The Cane

The cane symbolizes dignity and refinement for the Tramp. It is the one thing about his outfit that is probably most unusual for a typical tramp. It is part of his walk and it is part of his identity. When the newspaper boys taunt him for the first time in the film, they take his cane. He immediately gets it back. When he is taken off to prison, he is apprehended by the police who knock his cane down. The boys pick up his cane and return it to him. They may taunt the Tramp, but they realize he is no ordinary, hopeless vagrant.

When the tramp is released from prison, it is the first time in the film that he is without his cane for more than a second or two. His stay in prison has left him feeling somewhat demoralized and depressed. He no longer feels as optimistic and dignified as he usually does. His attitude is easily detected by his walk, the fact that he longer has a shirt on in under his tight-fitting jacket, and his clothes, in general, are much more shabby than ever before. His dignity has been stripped.



Essay Questions

Describe the character of the Tramp, physically and emotionally.

How is the Tramp different after serving his sentence in jail for robbery and how is this obvious?

How does the Tramp act as a savior in the film? Who does he save and why?

Why does the girl assume the Tramp is a millionaire?

Describe the ending of the film. Does the girl finally accept the Tramp for who he really is? Does she reject him? How are they both affected by this final revelation?

Describe the role blindness plays in the film.

Describe the different ways the Tramp is persecuted in the movie and made to feel inferior.

Describe the use of society, social classes, and prejudice in the film.

Compare and contrast silent films as opposed to talking films.

Explain, using specific examples from the film, how the movie reflects the time in which it was filmed and released.