

Miller's Crossing Film Summary

Miller's Crossing by Joel and Ethan Coen

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Miller's Crossing Film Summary.....	1
Contents.....	2
Context.....	3
Summary and Analysis.....	4
Characters.....	9
Themes.....	12
Style and Cinematography.....	13
Motifs.....	14
Symbols.....	15
Essay Questions.....	17

Context

Miller's Crossing is set in Prohibitionist-era 1920s and 1930s. Because alcohol was illegal during this time, people only craved it more. Because people were willing to pay veritable fortunes just to get a few drinks, crime bosses created clubs where people could dance, party, and most importantly, drink. In order to keep these illegal clubs open, the crime bosses forced city mayors and police chiefs to obey them. Many people were terrified of the crime bosses, especially anyone who got on their bad side. Al Capone was one such crime boss. Like Leo in *Miller's Crossing*, he was a powerful man who ran the smuggling rings and the city.

Many people feel that *Miller's Crossing* is just another episode of *The Godfather* trilogy. However, the Coen brothers make sure to show the differences between their film and Coppola's from the opening scene. Rather than panning out on a man who talks about his faith in America, *Miller's Crossing* pans in on Caspar talking about his ethical beliefs.

Miller's Crossing is based on the work of Dashiell Hammett, specifically "The Glass Key" and "Red Harvest." "The Red Harvest" had already been adapted as *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Per un pugno di dollari* (1964). However, Joel and Ethan Coen wrote their own script and portrayed the story as they wanted.

Joel and Ethan Coen have written several films together, including *Barton Fink*. *Barton Fink* is about a writer who has writer's block, the exact experience the Coen brothers were experiencing when they were trying to write *Miller's Crossing*. Instead of finishing *Miller's Crossing*, they took time out to write *Barton Fink*, expressing their own frustrations with writer's block.

Leo's role was originally written for Trey Wilson, who had starred in the Coen brothers' film *Raising Arizona*. However, when Wilson died before production on *Miller's Crossing* began, Albert Finney stepped in and took over the role. Finney gives an amazing performance as Leo, and the film wouldn't be the same without him. One funny moment is when Tom and Verna have their argument in the ladies room; Albert Finney is actually in drag in the background of that scene.

Miller's Crossing was nominated for and received a few awards. The Casting Society of America nominated it for the Artios Award for the Best Casting of a Feature Film; this award would have gone to Donna Isaacson and John S. Lyons. Additionally, the film was nominated for the Golden Seashell Award for Best Director for Joel Coen. Joel did not win the Golden Seashell, but did win the Silver Seashell.



Summary and Analysis

Miller's Crossing begins with a glass being filled with ice and a man talking in the background. The man, Johnny Caspar, explains that every time he lays a bet with a certain person, the odds go bad for him. Caspar is upset because his bookie, Bernie, is selling tips on the way he bets, which makes his bets worth less. Caspar finishes his complaint by saying, "Friendship. Character. Ethics." Another man, Leo, tells Caspar that what he's saying is "as clear as mud," to which Caspar replies, "It's getting so a businessman, can't expect no return from a fixed fight. If you can't trust a fix, what can you trust?"

Caspar continues to explain that ethics are the only thing that separates people from animals, and Bernie selling him out is unethical. He then says that even though many other people know about the fix, only Bernie is the one who is ethically shady. Caspar has decided to kill Bernie, but Leo refuses because Bernie pays for protection. Caspar tells Leo that he will kill Bernie either way, but Leo says that he will start kicking if Caspar kills Bernie.

Tom Reagan, Leo's advisor, stays in the room with Leo, and Leo tells Tom that he's going to help him out. Before he leaves, Tom tells Leo to think about the repercussions of his decision: what protecting Bernie gets them and what making Caspar angry loses them. At this point, the credits roll on the background of a forest and we see a bowler hat fall to the ground before it is blown away by the wind.

Someone wakes up Tom in the back room of a club and tells him that he bet his hat in a game, but he's lucky the game broke up or he might have bet his pants. As they discuss the night's betting options, the man tells Tom not to go deeper in the hole. Tom wakes up and goes to visit Verna, Bernie's sister. He tries to retrieve his hat that she won. Verna tells him to go away, but then she lets him in to have a drink.

Later, Leo knocks at Tom's door. Leo apologizes for coming over so late, but he tells Tom that he can't cut Bernie loose. Leo is worried about Verna, even though Tom tells him that Verna can take care of herself, maybe even better than Leo can. Tom asks Leo if he thinks that Verna would still be spending time with Leo if she didn't need him to take care of her brother. Tom tells Leo that Bernie and Verna both play their angles well, but Leo tells him to shut up. Tom tells him that if Verna is such an angel, he wouldn't be looking for her at four in the morning. Leo explains that he had someone follow Verna that afternoon to keep her safe, but both Verna and Rug, the guy tailing her, have disappeared. Tom tells Leo not to trade buddy blows with Caspar, but Leo says he can trade buddy blows with anyone except Tom and Verna. Leo admits that he's a sap, but tells Tom to let him know if he hears anything. Tom walks into the adjoining room where Verna is in bed. She asks if he said anything about her or her brother. Tom asks if she saw the guy tailing her earlier, but she didn't. She becomes angry when she discovers that Tom told Leo she was a tramp and he should dump her.



Down in the street, a boy and his dog find Rug dead. The boy takes the man's toupee and runs away. The next morning, the newspaper carries a report about a Gangland slaying. At a party the next night, Mink tells Tom he should put in a good word for Bernie. Tom says that Bluepoint, Mink's boss, will be upset if he finds out that Mink has another "amigo." Upstairs, Tom meets with several politicians and tells one that he voted for him six times the night before. Leo tells him that Verna showed back up but he didn't press her to find out where she was. They debate why anyone would take a dead man's hair, but they can't figure it out.

Leo has Dale tell Tom that the new plan is to close down some of the clubs Caspar runs downtown. Tom advises against this plan, but Leo tells him that he can't lay down to Caspar. Tom, on the other hand, believes that Bernie is a small price to pay in order to keep the peace in the city. Tom reminds Leo that if he starts a war, he has more to lose than Caspar. Tom walks out because Leo is committed to the plan.

Tom has a couple of drinks at the bar and assures the bartender that he will pay his debt. He then barges into the Ladies Room to talk to Verna. Tom tells her not to bother with makeup because Leo is already smitten with her. Verna explains that she likes Leo's honesty and heart. Tom tells her that it must be true that opposites attract. He explains to her that Leo is about to shoot himself in the foot for her by protecting her brother.

Verna tells Tom she will do whatever it takes to protect Bernie, even if she needs to take Leo out sometimes. Verna tells him if he wants her to leave Leo alone, all he has to do is ask. Tom tells her to stop spinning Leo in circles and pointing him where to go. He also reminds her that he doesn't have to ask, because if he tells Leo about the night before, her game would dry up. He tells her that even last night was just an angle she played, and then he kisses her. She punches him, and he throws a glass at her, missing by an inch to hit the mirror behind her.

When Tom returns home, the phone is ringing. After several minutes, he finally answers it. Tom tells the caller that he needs a couple of days to get the money together. Bernie shows up at the house and tells Tom that he shouldn't be messing with Leo. Bernie says he needs help from his friends, and he would be willing to help Tom with his debts to make them become friends. Tom tells Bernie he'll think about his proposal.

The next day, a couple of men corner Tom and take him to Caspar. Caspar writes a check to cover all of Tom's debts plus a little. Caspar explains that he wants them all to be friends, and if Tom is his friend, then Tom will turn Bernie over to him. Tom tells Caspar he'll think about it, but Caspar tells him if he doesn't agree, then he'll not be in any shape to walk out of the room. Tom asks whether it's a physical state or mental state. Caspar becomes angry, charges out, and leaves Tom in the hands of his henchman. The man prepares to fight Tom, but Tom hits him with a chair. The man hurries out, and another man comes in to help out. The police raid the building in the nick of time. The police chief asks what Leo thinks he's doing. Eventually, Leo will lose control of the town, and right now nothing's going well for anyone.



Tom goes to Verna's, and she pretends to call the police. Rug was following Verna, and Tom believes that either she or Bernie killed him. Verna tells Tom that he didn't come there to interrogate her, but because of his heart, even though he hasn't used it in years. Tom and Verna make love instead of talking about Rug's death.

At Leo's house, two men murder a man downstairs and set fire to the house. The two men then go upstairs and try to kill Leo. However, he escapes as Danny Boy plays in the background. The next day, Leo tries to find both the mayor and the police chief, but they are not taking his calls. Tom tells Leo that he looks vulnerable now and that he only runs the town because people believe he runs it. Tom tells Leo that he has to get rid of Bernie. Leo admits that he really wants to ask Verna to marry him, but he can't do it if Bernie is murdered. Tom is disturbed by the idea and tells Leo that Verna was the one who killed Rug. He suggests that maybe Rug knew where Verna was sleeping and asks Leo to trust him about Verna. Finally, he tells Leo that Verna was with him the night Rug followed her and Leo dropped by.

Leo follows Tom downstairs and begins to beat him up until the bartender offers to throw Tom out. Leo agrees, saying, "It's the kiss-off. If I never see him again, it won't be soon enough." Verna comes over to Tom's place after he gets home. She tells him that Leo broke up with her, and he tells her that he told Leo about them. She explains that if he wanted her, he could have just asked.

Tom can't sleep, and he tells Verna about a dream he once had. He was walking through the woods when his hat was blown off by the wind. She suggests that he chased his hat, but he says there's nothing more foolish than a man chasing his hat. Tom tells her that he will never work with Leo again. Tom asks where Bernie is staying, because Leo will no longer protect him. She says that since they both double-crossed Leo, they're "about bad enough to deserve each other."

Tom leaves the apartment to meet with Caspar, who is finishing a meeting with the police chief and O'Doole. Caspar offers Tom a job, but Tom tells him that he'll only work for Caspar if he'll get Leo off him. Caspar says that Tom has to give out some information too, so Tom tells Caspar and Bluepoint that Bernie is at the Royale and may even have Mink with him, a fact that upsets Dane as he and Mink have been lovers as well. Caspar sends Tom with a couple of other thugs to pick up Bernie at the Royale while Bluepoint goes to find Mink. The guys find Bernie and take him out on a lonely road. Tom is sent into the woods with Bernie; Caspar wants Tom to kill Bernie to prove his loyalty. In the woods, Bernie begs for his life. Tom pulls the trigger but doesn't kill Bernie. Tom tells him to go someplace where no one knows him or he will end up dead. Tom meets the other men and goes back to the city with them.

Tom calls Mink and tells him to watch out for himself. As he turns to walk out of the phone booth, he is hit by one of Leo's men and receives a warning from Leo. Tom begins to send a nasty message to Leo, but the man kicks him again. Tom meets with Caspar, who tells him that he believes Mink was stealing from him as well. Caspar says that Bluepoint can't find Mink, and Tom tells Caspar that Bernie said Bluepoint and Mink were setting Bernie up. Caspar doesn't believe Bluepoint would cross him, but he did



suggest they double-cross Tom by killing him after they found Bernie. Tom reminds Caspar that there's always a wild card where love is involved, implying that Bluepoint's feelings for Mink might affect his actions. Although Caspar trusts Bluepoint, he tells Tom to see what he can find out about Mink.

After leaving Caspar, Tom visits a boxing ring and watches the boxers practicing. On the other side of town, Bluepoint breaks into Verna's apartment, and she tells him that she and Leo are over. Bluepoint isn't convinced that Verna would really go for Tom since he "put a bullet in her brother." Two of Leo's guys show up to watch out for Verna, but Bluepoint shoots them both. The guys tell him that Leo is moving around and meeting with his gang the next night. Bluepoint then kills the man who told him. While Bluepoint is talking to the men, Verna runs away.

Bernie shows up at Tom's place that same night. Bernie tells Tom that if he stuck around it would be bad for Tom, but it might be good for him. Bernie is still upset that Tom pointed him out and almost killed him. Bernie wants to watch Tom squirm, and he wants Tom to kill Caspar. He threatens Tom with his presence if Caspar isn't dead within a couple of days. Tom tries to catch up with him, but Bernie catches him and knocks him down. Bernie tells Tom that he wouldn't dare kill Bernie, and even if he tried, Bernie could just beg again.

Tom goes to Leo's club and tells the bartender he knows about the bets they've been placing on the underdog for the weekend's fights. The police show up to raid the club, and Tom has a chat with the police chief. The chief tells Tom he thinks Caspar is just as crazy as Leo, and an Italian at that.

As Tom walks down the road, Caspar's guys pick him up. The guys are suspicious about Tom visiting Leo's place. Bluepoint is also suspicious about Bernie's death because he found out that the other men didn't see Bernie's body. Bluepoint plans to take Tom out to Miller's Crossing, where he supposedly killed Bernie, to see if the body is there. He explains that if they don't find Bernie out there, then they'll be leaving Tom out there instead. When they don't find the body, Bluepoint threatens to kill Tom; however, he changes his mind when they find a dead body whose face is unidentifiable.

When Tom returns to the city, he visits Drop Johnson, man who bet a large amount on the fight. He asks the man whether he has seen Bernie since his death. Tom tells him that Bernie needs to get in touch with him since something has come up. The police blow up a building and then ask anyone left inside to come out. The only person left is the bartender, who they kill. Someone else begins shooting out of the building, and the police try to fight back.

Tom goes to visit Caspar, who is meeting with the Mayor. The Mayor is trying to explain that Caspar's cousins can be part of the government, but he can't put them into elected positions. Caspar finally throws the Mayor out of his own office. Caspar apologizes for Tom's ride this morning, but he explains that he has heard rumors about Bernie still being alive. Tom tells him that Bluepoint might be making up the rumors since Caspar has a fixed fight the next night and Bluepoint could have been the one selling him out.



Bernie calls Tom, and Tom discovers that Bernie took Mink out to the Crossing and killed him there. Tom tells Bernie that he won't kill Caspar for him, and if Bernie wants to keep his existence secret he'll have to pay before Tom leaves town the next morning. As Tom leaves his place to visit Caspar, the guys wanting to collect his money beat on him.

Tom tells Caspar that Mink said Bluepoint wants Caspar to believe he has disappeared so that Bluepoint can double-cross him. Bluepoint has brought Drop Johnson, hoping to prove that Tom betrayed Caspar. Bluepoint believes that Tom killed Mink, and he starts to strangle Tom. Caspar stops Bluepoint just before Tom dies. Caspar kills Bluepoint for double-crossing him. Tom tells Caspar that Mink will be at Tom's apartment at 4:00 in the morning, and Caspar says he will kill Mink then.

Verna visits Tom and they walk through the streets together. Verna believes that Bernie is dead, but Tom says he can't tell her anything. Verna pulls a gun on Tom and tries to find out why he would kill Bernie. Tom tells her he did it for Leo. He finally tells her that Bernie is alive, but she doesn't totally believe him. She says, "That's all you are, Tom, a liar with no heart." Rather than kill him, Verna begins to cry and walks away.

Tom goes home. When he goes in, he tells the woman downstairs to go down to the store, call the police, and stay there until they arrive. At the top of the stairs, Tom finds Caspar is dead, shot by Bernie. Bernie is waiting to kill Tom. He tells Tom that Mink killed Rug because he thought that Rug was following him. Mink was afraid that Bluepoint would find out that Mink and Bernie were together. Bernie had planned to pin Caspar's murder on Bluepoint, but Tom tells him that Bluepoint is already dead halfway across town. Bernie begs for his life and asks Tom to look into his heart. Tom responds, "What heart?" and shoots Bernie. Tom makes a call to place a bet on that night's fight with money Caspar had.

Tom tries to go see Leo, but Leo is in a meeting with the police chief and mayor. The next day, Tom goes to Bernie's funeral to see Verna and Leo. Verna takes Leo's car, so Tom and Leo walk back together. Leo tells Tom that he and Verna are getting married; Verna asked Leo to marry her. Leo is upset because he thought Tom had really gone over to Caspar's side. Leo applauds Tom on a smart play and begs him to come back to work for Leo. Leo believes that things can go back to being the way things were, but Tom doesn't want that. He says goodbye to Leo. As Leo walks away, Tom watches him go.



Characters

Tom Reagan, played by Gabriel Byrne

Description

Tom is Leo's political advisor who gives him advice on all the important aspects of his decisions when dealing with the mayor, the police chief, and Caspar. Although Tom is loyal to Leo, he is also sleeping with Leo's girlfriend, Verna. Tom knows that by having an intimate relationship with Verna, he is jeopardizing his place with Leo, but he also knows that getting information from Verna will help him to protect Leo.

Tom eventually tells Leo that he is sleeping with Verna in an effort to convince Leo to have Bernie, Verna's brother killed. Caspar is trying to take over the city from Leo, and Tom is doing what he can to protect Leo from Leo's own bad decisions.

Analysis

Tom often seems aloof and dark, but he is actually a kind man who sacrifices for those he loves. Tom cares deeply for both Verna and Leo. Tom tries to protect Verna by letting her brother go free, but Bernie sees weakness rather than kindness in this act and eventually forces Tom to kill him.

Tom shows love for Leo by protecting Leo from his own kind impulses. Tom goes to Caspar's side so that he can find out important information and protect Leo. Because of Tom, Leo eventually wins back the city from Caspar. Tom does what he believes is right in order to protect his friends, despite the costs to himself.

Verna, played by Marcia Gay Harden

Description

Verna is a beautiful woman who is Leo's mistress and is also sleeping with Tom. Verna's brother Bernie is a bookie who is in trouble with Johnny Caspar for selling his bets. Verna tries to use her connections with Tom and Leo to protect Bernie from Caspar.

Verna loves both Tom and Leo but in different ways. Eventually, she chooses Leo because Tom killed Bernie. Verna is a strong woman, and she shows her strength when she opposes Tom in the club and when she fights Caspar's men.

Analysis

Verna is a beautiful woman who plays both sides to her best advantage. Verna strings Leo along, telling him that she might marry him one day, because she knows that she



can protect her brother from Caspar by keeping Leo on her side. Verna also realizes that Tom plays a major part in her brother's safety.

Although Verna can be seen in this rather cynical light, she can also be seen as a woman trying desperately to protect those she loves. Verna is a strong woman, and she does what she can to protect those she loves. She uses her connections to try to save her wayward brother, and she keeps her relationship with Tom a secret from Leo because she knows that it would hurt Leo.

Leo, played by Albert Finney

Description

Leo is the head crime boss in the city, and he controls the mayor and the police chief as well as the rest of the city. It is the Prohibition era, and Leo runs numerous clubs throughout the city that sell alcohol. Leo's political advisor, Tom, is also one of his closest confidantes.

Leo is dating a beautiful woman named Verna who professes to love him while secretly sleeping with Tom. Leo protects Verna's brother, Bernie, when Johnny Caspar wants to kill Bernie for selling tips on his bets.

Analysis

Leo is the top crime boss, but we wonder during the movie if he could actually stay on top without Tom. Leo seems to be simultaneously a hothead and a softy: so he does rash things while at the same time going easy on undeserving people like Bernie because of love.

Leo loves Verna and tries to prove it by protecting her brother, but he only ends up losing his power for a time. Leo eventually wins Verna and his place in the city, but he only gains these things because Tom sacrifices himself for Leo.

Bernie Bernbaum, played by John Turturro

Description

Bernie Bernbaum is the catalyst of the whole situation in the film. Bernie is a bookie who has been helping fix fights for Leo; however, he has also been selling tips to others based on Leo's bets.

Bernie gets in over his head when Leo finally realizes that Bernie has cheated him. Leo wants Bernie dead, and Bernie begins to play all his cards so he can stay alive. Although he is a coward, Bernie uses his connections to manipulate people and situations in order to save his own life.



Analysis

Bernie is an all-around bad guy. Although he seems somewhat innocent in the beginning, Bernie takes advantage of every situation in the film. First, Bernie uses his role as a bookie to make extra money by selling tips. When he gets into trouble, he tries to manipulate his way out of it.

Tom spares Bernie's life for Verna's sake, but Bernie comes back to take advantage of the situation and to blackmail Tom with his existence. Bernie even kills his lover, Mink, so he can cover up Tom's tracks and get more money off Tom. Bernie waits for Tom the final night so that he can kill him before Caspar's men find Bernie. Bernie ends up killing Caspar instead. Bernie then dies, leaving viewers feeling that he's been asking for it all along.

Johnny Caspar, played by Jon Polito

Description

Johnny Caspar is the leader of one of the top mob families in the city. Caspar generally respects Leo, but when Leo refuses to let him kill Bernie, Caspar tries to fight back. While a tough, malicious man, Caspar also shows his family values by trying to take care of his son.

Analysis

Caspar is an angry man trying to get revenge. He finds out that Bernie is trading on his bets, and he decides the best way to stop this is to kill Bernie. When Leo refuses to have Bernie killed, Caspar shows his terrible temper and goes after Bernie on his own. Caspar uses Tom and other men to do his dirty work for him, and he tries to take over the town from Leo, a lifelong dream of his. Caspar eventually loses, but we see that there are many sides to his personality as he kills men and cares for his son.



Themes

Everyone Has an Angle

Tom Reagan constantly reminds Leo and the others in this film that everyone has an angle. He realizes that Verna is using both him and Leo to protect her no-good brother Bernie from Caspar. Tom also has his own angle, and he uses everyone around him to get what he wants. No one is innocent in this film; everyone has something they want that they will do anything to get.

Since everyone has an angle, no one can trust anyone. Even Verna, who says she loves Tom, is working her own angle. Likewise, Tom has to keep himself separated from everyone else so they cannot hurt him. Tom must remain cold and aloof in order to protect himself from others. He works both sides of the crime rings in the city, but he is a man unto himself. In the end, we discover that Tom's angle is to help protect those he loves.

Multi-faceted People

In this film, we see many different aspects of each major character's personality. All people are not evil nor are all people completely good, and *Miller's Crossing* shows the multiple attitudes and allegiances of each person. For example, Tom is both a shrewd, aloof man as well as Verna's passionate lover and Leo's faithful friend.

Verna also shows both her manipulative and loving sides, while Leo shows his powerful presence next to his feelings of incompetence and fear. We are reminded on every side that people are not always what they seem: sometimes they are better. The tough facades the characters wear are replaced by their true identities as real people who care for and sacrifice for one another.

Sacrifice for Love

At the end of the film, Tom shows that he cares for his friends more than anything else. He is willing to sacrifice everything for the friends he loves. Tom uses his connections and his power to ensure respect and freedom from both Leo and Caspar. However, he spends the entire movie trying to protect Leo and Verna.

Although Tom tries to protect his friends, he has to sacrifice Bernie to save himself and Leo. After Bernie dies, Tom loses Verna. He is sad about the loss, but he is glad to have saved Leo from Caspar. We see that Tom does care about Leo and that part of the reason he worked with Caspar was to protect Leo. Tom sacrificed himself for Leo and gained respect and freedom through the sacrifice.

Style and Cinematography

Films shot in New Orleans are known to have a rich, posh atmosphere about them; *Miller's Crossing* is no different. The film pulls the viewer into the world of the city and makes the 1930s come to life. The deep colors used in the decorations and costumes, as well the authenticity of both, help to create a world of gangsters, love, and violence.

Miller's Crossing also paints an historically accurate picture of gangsters and their wars in the 1930s. With Prohibition, every mob family tried to cash in on illegal liquor in their clubs and on the streets. The opulence of the clubs and the wealth of those attending represents the desire for money and alcohol at the time.

While Joel and Ethan Coen take shots throughout the movie in ways that remind viewers of *The Godfather*, they also separate the film from *The Godfather* in all ways. For example, in the beginning scene the Coen's have a shot that pans in on Caspar whereas Coppola begins his film with a shot panning out from his character. The brothers use every possibility to show that their film is inherently different from Coppola's even though they are about events from the same time period.

The film is shot in dim lighting throughout much of the film. The dim lights make it difficult for viewers to see everything that is happening at one time. Alliances and relationships are a bit confused at times in this film, and the lighting helps to reveal this disparity. When Bernie waits for Tom at the end of the film, the lights are very dim, showing that Bernie does not understand that Tom is kind rather than weak. Also, as Tom meets with Caspar, the lights dim as the viewer tries to discover Tom's motives in meeting with Leo's enemy.



Motifs

Mob Families

Gangsters are a popular subject of many films, including *The Godfather*. The 1930s were a time of great contests between mob families, as everyone tried to make money off illegal liquor. The stories of the families and their fights helps to highlight the importance of friendship and alliances in life.

As we see Caspar and Leo fight for their city, we also learn that the most important thing to each of them is the people they love. Caspar wants to use his power for his son, while Leo wants to use his power to protect Verna and her brother, Bernie.

Corrupt Officials

Corrupt officials. What good film would be without them? Corrupt officials are practically a requirement for any film dealing with politics, especially when the mafia is involved. The Mayor and the police chief realize that they cannot run the city without the help of Leo or another mob boss, so they willingly take payoffs and buy their way out of situations.

Through the corrupt officials we are able to know exactly who is in power in the city at any time. At the beginning of the film, the two work with Leo and give his clubs a break. However, after Johnny Caspar begins to fight Leo and win, the two corrupt officials go crawling to him for protection. In the end, the city comes back to Leo, as shown by the two officials sitting in his office plotting with him once again.

The Wild Card

Every story has a wild card that can change the outcome of the entire story; a wild card that can and will change the lives of everyone involved. Love is the wild card in *Miller's Crossing*. In some situations in the film, Tom even says that love is the wild card.

The first time Tom mentions love as a wild card, he is talking about the relationship between Mink and Bernie. Later, however, we see that both his and Leo's love for Verna are wild cards as well. Because of Verna, neither Leo nor Tom can kill Bernie, although Tom does kill him in the end. Also, Tom cares for Leo and does all he can to protect him from Caspar and any others who try to take advantage of him. Love is the wild card that can change everything for these characters, and it does.

Symbols

Bowler Hat

The bowler hat symbolizes friendship and the emptiness resulting from the loss of a friend. Tom's dream about his hat falling off and rolling through the woods symbolizes his desire to keep his friends close and protect them. Tom shows his loyalty to his friends throughout the film.

Although Tom seems to turn on Leo at one point during the film, Tom is actually trying to protect Leo. By going to Caspar's side, Tom has a chance to protect his friend. He also tries to protect Verna from Bernie's death, but Bernie does not appreciate the act and begins to blackmail Tom. Finally, Tom has to put an end to Bernie to save all those he loves.

At the end of the film, Tom stands at Miller's Crossing and pulls his hat low on his head. Tom knows that he has saved all of his friends. Although he is sad about the loss of Verna and Leo, Tom knows that he has done the right thing, and he can live his life happily.

Desks

Desks represent power in *Miller's Crossing*. Every time someone is sitting at a desk, we can quickly see the relationship between the people in the room. For example, the first scene with Caspar talking to Leo and Tom tells us the relationship between the men. Caspar and Leo are the two most powerful men, so they sit on opposite sides of a large, heavy desk. Tom is in the background listening as a third party to the episode. Although he takes Leo's side, he distances himself from the situation, showing his independence. Bluepoint and some other men stand on each side of the desk representing their relationships to each man. Leo's men are on his side while Caspar's men are on his; the only man separate is Tom.

Guns

As with desks, guns also show who has the power in this film. At the beginning of the film, Leo and Caspar show their strength by their words and their weapons. They are obviously enemies, and they will do anything to rule the city. Leo is in charge when the film begins, and he shows his power over the police by his power over their guns. Neither the police chief nor the mayor would dare to close one of Leo's clubs, because he is the most important person in the city.

Later, Leo begins to lose his power as shown by the cops and their guns coming in to close down his clubs. Additionally, when Bernie and Tom are at Miller's Crossing, Tom's power in the situation is shown by the gun he holds. However, later Bernie uses a gun

to threaten Tom. The guns symbolize power, and the characters in the film use them to their advantage.

Essay Questions

How does Caspar's first speech about "Friendship. Character. Ethics." relate to the rest of the film?

What is Caspar's solution to his problem with the fights that he has fixed?

What does Tom's hat represent in his dreams and real life?

What is Verna's relationship to Tom, Leo, and Bernie?

Why do Caspar and Leo go to war?

Is Tom playing both sides during the film or does he have another plan?

How are Bluepoint, Mink, and Bernie all connected? What repercussions does this have for each of the men?

How does Bernie avoid death the first time?

Why do Caspar and Bluepoint go after Verna?

Why does Tom say "goodbye" to Leo at the end of the film? Why wouldn't he go back to working for Leo?

Bibliography

<http://imdb.com/title/tt0100150>

<http://www.wehateyouandyourhorrendoustasteineverything.com/cinema/reviews/millerscrossing.php>