Movie Review: Yentl Essay, Research Paper

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Everyone at one time or another has felt out of place. Feeling unsure

of one’s place in society is an experience that every young adult faces but

deals with differently. Some rebel while others comply with whatever has been

set out for them by society or their parents, or both. The role of the woman in

society is forever changing. Where women were once obligated to stay in the

home and dote on their husbands, they are now working in the same types of jobs

as their husbands. What was typically the male role has been blurred and

practically obliterated. Religious roles have followed society’s lead in their

evolution. For example, since its creation over five thousand years ago, the

Jewish religion has evolved in some movements to involve women and men equally

in ceremonies. The orthodox movement has always remained traditional in its

belief that women have their place in the home, cooking and raising children,

and serving their husbands. Education remains the man’s duty. The movie Yentl

starring Barbara Streisand, shows this traditional belief through its plot,

characterization, music, lights, camera angles, and symbolism.

Set in Eastern Europe in 1904, Yentl captures the essence of the Jewish

woman’s eternal struggle. It is the story of a young girl, in love with

learning but forbidden to do so by Jewish tradition. Upon her father’s death,

Yentl disguises herself as a boy to attend a yeshiva (religious school) and

continue her studies. She befriends Avigdor, a male scholar at the yeshiva,

and falls in love with him. Driven by her love for him, Yentl will do all that

she can to ensure that he is near her and that her secret is not revealed.

Yentl struggles with her secret until the day she can no longer remain silent.

She tells Avigdor what she has done, and of her love for him, but he cannot

accept a woman who refuses to act as a traditional woman should. So Yentl

departs for America in hope of a different mentality, but never forgetting her

love for Avigdor and all that she has learned.

Based on Isaac Bashevis Singer’s acclaimed short story, “Yentl, the

Yeshiva Boy,” the story is somewhat unrealistic but serves its purpose in

proving a point; the point being that women have always been just as capable as

men in studying and education, and that a person’s role should not be defined

for them. It describes a woman’s search for freedom and her discovery not only

of love but of herself. Yentl, or Anshel as she is known throughout most of the

film, is played by Barbara Streisand who also directed, produced, and co-wrote

this film. She captures the character beautifully, the expression in her eyes

and voice displaying clearly the feelings of a woman struggling for knowledge

and love but torn between her desire to learn and the tradition of her religion.

When Avigdor says “What could she possibly be thinking?” the mentality of the

Jewish Orthodox man is revealed completely: a woman exists but to serve a man.

Yentl’s inner conflicts and thoughts are revealed through the music she

sings. It sets the mood and exposes Yentl’s feelings of despair. If it were

not for the lyrics of her songs, the audience would not be aware of Yentl’s

inner struggle. She tells us that she doesn’t know if she likes the way that

she feels – in love with Avigdor but forced to remain silent, she tells us of

her desire to please her father even though he is dead, and she tells us of her

plans to uncover her secret to Avigdor. The music that Barbara Streisand sings,

as well as the background music, helps to reveal feelings and mood as well as

the passage of time.

The mood and the passage of time are also indicated by the lighting.

When Yentl is accepted as a student at the yeshiva (a thing forbidden to women),

light streams in the window as if to show hope and happiness for Yentl. When

Yentl first disguises herself as a male, she sings her thoughts of fear, a

feeling also displayed by the candle which is lit and the light of which,

reflected on her face, shows her sadness. Often, the camera angle looks

downward on Yentl, perhaps to show that her efforts may seem large in her life,

but in the large picture of the Jewish religion, she will not be making large

changes. It may also be that this camera angle displays the assumed

insignificance of a woman, or her feelings of insignificance. The lighting, as

well as the camera angles contribute to the theme and mood of the film.

Symbolism plays a large role in the portrayal of theme in Yentl. A bird

soaring through the sky is frequently shown throughout the film. This

symbolizes Yentl’s struggle and eventual conquering of her feats. She, like the

bird, is able to soar – through the prejudices of her traditions and through the

world of knowledge for which she so longs. She displays this thought in the

last line of the movie when she sings “Papa watch me fly.” As well, when Yentl

transforms herself into Anshel, the boy, she looks at herself in a cracked

mirror and cuts her hair. This displays her uncertainty of herself and her

place in Jewish society, and the cutting of her hair symbolizes her

transformation and the beginning of a new life for her. Symbolism throughout

the film, contributes to the film’s theme of self-discovery and role reversal.

The plot, characterization, lighting, camera angles, and symbolism

reveal thoroughly the plot of this highly thought-evoking film. The plot mainly

contributes to proving that a woman’s place is not solely in the home. That

“story books for women, sacred books for men”, as the bookseller says at the

beginning of the story, is not an accurate assessment of a woman’s intellectual

capabilities. Because of Barbara Streisand’s fabulous and complete

characterization of Yentl, this movie comes to life and touches the hearts of

its viewers.