

Sample Essay 1 Comparison-contrast—Find the Controlling Idea and Structural Pattern(s)

The following connects to p. 189 of *Acting on Words*.

Venus Meets the Devil

Joyce Miller

I recently saw two movies in little more than two nights. One was *The Devil Wears Prada*, starring Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway. The other was *Venus*, starring Peter O'Toole and Jodie Whittaker. In each of these films, an older, flawed mentor initiates a young apprentice into the secrets of his or her respective arts in a manner close to hazing. In these ways, the films are similar, but in their senses of character and art, they are remarkably different.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Hathaway plays Andrea (Andy), a recent graduate of journalism school. Her dream is to write for *The New Yorker* and other magazines of that style and calibre. However, she ends up at a job interview as a personal assistant to Miranda Priestly (Streep), chief editor of *Runway*, a top fashion magazine. Miranda is a terrifying bully. When Andy unexpectedly gets the job, she decides she must stay for the sake of a good reference, but finds herself slowly drawn into the high-pressure world of fashion, at the expense of her personal life. Like Jessie, whose inner desire to be an artist is made less overt, Andy is led through a series of unpleasant challenges and abuses, representing a far harsher and more confusing “initiation” into life and art than she had ever anticipated.

In *Venus*, Whittaker plays Jessie, the young woman repulsed by the advances of a “dirty old” man. O’Toole’s character, Maurice (pronounced Morris), spoilt by having been once a heartthrob of the British stage, has indeed become that ugly, lustful caricature. Where the setup departs from the familiar devices of melodrama or sex farce, however, is that Jessie is no innocent maiden, and is far from helpless. She is as hard-bitten and disappointed by life as he. Maurice is painfully aware of his lost beauty, of her beauty not found, and of the only beauty that transcends the weaknesses of humanity; the beauty of art. In a way that is self-serving, sometimes disgusting or pathetic, yet at the same time ineffably beautiful, he sets out to introduce Jessie to the life of an artist – the artist that he alone recognizes beneath her surly ugliness, presumably because he knows that his own inner artist is now hidden from view by the shell of an unpleasant old man. In this pattern of flawed older mentor to young, unrecognized artist, the two films intersect. Beyond that somewhat superficial similarity, all kinship ends.

Signalling the main difference between the two, *Prada* goes for clichés from start to finish. Hathaway’s Andy character comes from nowhere and, not surprisingly, goes there. She manages to be well-informed about the *New Yorker* without having a clue about *Runway*. She also manages to write well, we are told, without ever looking at a book or magazine. By some mysterious power, a journalism graduate is sent to an interview for a top-level administrative position. Huh? There is no explanation, either, about how she met her boyfriend, an aspiring chef, or why they are a couple (a social anomaly, to be sure). A young woman in her group of apparently very casual friends announces halfway through the movie that she has known Andy for sixteen years. Again, huh? Andy is put through the usual paces of being tempted, giving in, and oh my goodness, nearly selling her soul to the fashion industry before inevitably, at the last moment, recovering her senses, returning to her true calling, and going to work for a real, live newspaper as a real, live journalist. The only lasting mark is that now she has a better sense of personal style.

Streep, the film’s promotional angle along with the designer labels, looks like a thousand bucks (several thousand, of course) through most of the film. This, indeed, is

consistent with a high-powered fashion editor. Perhaps to signal that the film is about more than appearance, or wishes to be, the ‘disclosure’ scene shows Streep without makeup, crying because her latest husband has left her. Granted, it is brave for a Hollywood actress to appear without makeup, but the clichéd situation, heavily foreshadowed when Andy chances on Miranda in an argument with said husband in his only appearance in the film, detracts from any sense of real pathos. *Prada* begins and ends in Hollywood fantasyland, its characters largely the puppets of commercialized plot formulas.

In stark contrast to this unbelievable approach to character and theme, *Venus* explores its subject with painful honesty. The characters’ failings show none of that over-the-top “evil” that everyone loves to hate (and, in the case of the ice-witch Miranda Priestly, that some may even find erotically exciting). *Venus*, for example, exposes Maurice’s ongoing dependence on the wife he deserted, and to whom he still metes out long overdue support payments whenever he literally needs a shoulder to cry on. Unlike Streep, O’Toole looks older than his actual age, and his character disintegrates further right before our eyes. One of his most insistent and brutal lessons concerns the necessity of the artist to be naked (not simply without makeup for a brief moment). He does this first by getting Jessie a job as a figure model, a move whereby he conveniently attempts to ogle her. The more pitiful ‘nakedness,’ though, is what *he* exposes to *her*. Early in the film, after he has prostate surgery, he hides his colostomy bag from everyone else but insists she be kept fully aware of its presence, even as he basks in the ‘celebrity’ that is the only thing she finds appealing about him.

Turning to Jessie, while her lost young soul draws on some common enough devices (among them a mother who resents her existence), the sheer unpleasantness of the character renders these devices believable. This is a woman who insists on making herself unlovable, and she succeeds, even with the viewer. She truly resembles those “real-life” people who, convinced they are too horrid to be loved, make that belief come true, not in a cute for the movies way, but in a real, “I’ll sit over here across the room as

far from you as possible” way. The only person who perceives any beauty about Jessie—at least, at first-- is the equally repugnant Maurice.

The most decisive difference between the two films occurs in their handling of the respective arts in question. *Prada* abounds with product placement, cameos, and people wheeling racks of clothing around, but without these, it could be about any high-pressure business. There is one nod to fashion as ‘art you live in’ that is meant to make us realize there’s something worthwhile behind all the nastiness, but one line doesn’t last very long under the ongoing ogling of product and celebrity for ogling’s sake. Yes, *Prada* invites us to embrace the voyeuristic behaviour that *Venus* clearly if sympathetically pities in Maurice. Given that Miranda mainly just bullies and abuses Andy, assigning her far-fetched quests with no clear thematic revelations, *Runway* art director Nigel, played by Stanley Tucci, appears possibly intended to complete the tutoring, à la Maurice in *Venus*, - - but nothing comes of that gesture to a more serious examination of the mentor-apprentice relationship

Venus, in contrast, struggles unwincingly with the painful message that art is the only way we very flawed humans can touch, briefly, the ineffable. The characters are ugly, angry, and selfish, but they are also capable of great goodness. The turning point of the movie is when Maurice takes Jessie to the set where he has a cameo in a cheesy period piece. He has an attack, perhaps fake, and looks directly into the camera, knowing Jessie is at the viewfinder: ‘Do you see?’ She does not see; she prefers the actress who conjures up crocodile tears while delivering hackneyed dialogue. It’s a long struggle, but by the end, she begins to see. She begins to address life, to reach out, and to discern more to acting than celebrity. She begins to perceive even her odd, great uncle Ian (Maurice’s uncelebrated acting crony played by character actor Leslie Phillips) as a person; she may even one day realize that Ian, too, was a great actor, despite the media’s having preferred Maurice for his now departed gorgeous looks and star charisma. The British stage is presented both as a gift to cherish and as a dull waste of time. O’Toole’s old actor friends are petty, silly seekers of truth. The best part about the way *Venus* handles art and the awakening of the artist is that it never presents it directly. This theme, which is central to

the film, is always at the corner of the viewer's eye. The only way to perceive it is to look at it indirectly. Jessie's triumphant ending comes when she simply walks with full confidence into a room full of artists, drops her robe, and assumes the pose of Venus-- for a female artist.

Both films use characters and their situations to explore the theme of apprenticeship into art and life, but while *Prada* is an exercise in frustration as the characters run through one stock situation after another, *Venus* explores the frustration of simply being human in a way that is mesmerizing and ultimately rewarding. Be warned, however. Some viewers may consider *Venus* too "adult" in its language and images. Content rating aside, it is at once so delicate and so vicious as to be truly difficult to watch. Whereas the one film offers a ninety-minute advertisement for attractive products, the other shows how it is possible to rise above being a product, if only for a short, short, pitifully short time.

Note: Released on June 30, 2006, *The Devil Wears Prada* follows a screenplay by Aline Brosh McKenna based on a novel by Lauren Weisberger. David Frankel directed. Henif Kureishi wrote *Venus*, released in January 21, 2007. Roger Mitchell directs. Joyce Miller provided Chapter 20 of *Acting on Words*, on speech communication; she also wrote the guidelines in "Literary and Film Analysis" (at this website, Chapter 15) on how to review a film and has contributed other short sample essays throughout the text and site.

For Further Thinking

1. In Chapter 12 we discuss the differences-similarities test (p. 185) and the disadvantages-advantages test (p.186). Which test appears to have helped determine the controlling idea of this essay?
2. What is Miller's controlling idea? How does she handle thesis statement? Does she provide reasons to go with her controlling idea?

3. Which of the two basic purposes of comparison-contrast (p. 173) has Miller decided upon? How do you know?

4. Is Miller's essay shaped primarily according to point by point or subject by subject, or is it a hybrid pattern? Do a paragraph-by-paragraph outline of this essay, indicating, for each paragraph, the topic sentence and method of organization. From this sketch, declare what overall pattern is followed by the essay..

5. What type of publication and type of audience do you think Miller may have had in mind for this essay? What leads you to your answer?

6. Review the tones chart on the inside back cover of this text (or p. 20, 2nd ed.). In what way is Miller's essay suitable for usual academic style and purposes? In what ways might some academics require changes of tone to suit standard scholarly style?

7. Miller saw *Venus* at a theatre dedicated to less commercial and more artistic fare. Even in that environment, the film was consigned to the theatre's small, after-thought basement space, shown to a sprinkling of people on a small screen under the cavernous space above. To say that *The Devil Wears Prada* outsold *Venus* would be an understatement. Chances are, you have heard of the fashion vehicle but not *Venus*. Consider an essay of analysis in which you explore possible reasons why it seems so often that serious art languishes in poverty and obscurity while manipulative fare garners fortune and fame (at least for the short run after its release).