

Miller's Crossing Study Guide

Written & Directed by Joel and Ethan Coen
1990

Characters

Tom Regan (Gabriel Byrne) – Tom is the consiglieri (advisor) of Leo O'Bannon, head of the Irish mafia in an unnamed city. Although he is loyal to Leo, he does do some things that are disloyal, such as having an affair with Leo's girlfriend (Verna), and switching sides during the war without explaining why he was doing it.

Leo O'Bannon (Albert Finney) – The head of the Irish mafia in the unnamed town. He lets his emotional involvement with Verna affect his leadership and unwittingly winds up in a turf war with the Italian mobster, Johnny Caspar.

Bernie Bernbaum (John Turturro) – A bookie for Johnny Caspar. At the start of the film, a hit is put out on him for having flagrantly told people of Caspar's fixed boxing matches to make a personal profit on the information.

Verna Bernbaum (Marcia Gay Harden) – Sister to Bernie and girlfriend of Leo. Although she has plans to marry Leo, she is sleeping with Tom on the side and her interest in Leo seems merely to protect her brother, Bernie.

Jonny Caspar (Jon Polito) – Giovanni Gasparo, the head of the Italian mafia in the unnamed town. His organization originally pays tribute to Leo's crime family until the war starts and he gains the upper hand.

Eddie Dane (J.E. Freeman) – The advisor to Johnny Caspar. He is a ruthless individual and is vicious towards both his friends and enemies. However, he is also the boyfriend of Mink Larouie.

Mink Larouie (Steve Buscemi) – Eddie Dane's boyfriend. He has no real loyalty as he is having an affair with Bernie Bernbaum, and is also giving him tips on Caspar's fixed fights after Bernie is condemned.

Frankie and Tic-Tac – Two thugs in the employ of Johnny Caspar. They often do his dirty work.

"Rug" Daniels – A thug in the employ of Leo. He is killed early in the film. He is ordered to protect Verna, but is accidentally killed by Mink, who believed he was a spy for Eddie Dane.

Lazaro – Tom Regan's personal bookie. He is very patient with Tom, who continues to lose money on horse races. He eventually sends some thugs to beat up Tom, but politely tells them 'not to break anything'.

O'Doole and the Mayor – The official leaders of the unnamed town. O'Doole is the chief of police. They switch sides several times depending on who they think is going to win the war.

"Drop" Johnson – A boxer and a contact of Bernie Bernbaum. He places bets for Bernie when he doesn't want to use his own name.

Elements

1. **Antihero** – An antihero is a protagonist who does not display the positive qualities associated with protagonists who are heroes. For example, they can be cowardly, manipulative, cruel, cheat others, etc. They usually do enough positive actions to avoid qualification as a villain, but the way they accomplish their goals is usually underhanded.

Tone

1. **Noir** – Noir stories are a callback to black-and-white crime films. They tend to be cynical in their outlook on society, and the protagonist is often an anti-hero or unwilling hero. They tend to have an urban setting and involve sexual tension between main characters.

Setting

1. **Unknown city** – The city in which the action takes place is never named. However, hints (Niagara Falls, Palisades) indicate that it is probably somewhere in New York State.
2. **Prohibition** – The story takes place during the period in America where alcohol was illegal and crime families took advantage of the situation to become powerful entities.
3. **1920s** – The cars, buildings, songs, clothing and lingo (what's the rumpus) are from the 1920s.
4. **Miller's Crossing** – A forest outside of the city where the mobsters occasionally kill people or dump bodies. At the end of the film we learn that there is a cemetery in the woods.
5. **Turf War** – Most of the action takes place during the fight between the Irish and Italians for control of the city.

Sub-Plots

1. **Bernie ruining Caspar's fixed games** – Throughout the film, Bernie attempts to use his knowledge of Caspar's fixed fights to enrich himself and make friends.
2. **Bernie/Mink/Eddie Dane love triangle** – All three of these characters are homosexual. Eddie and Mink are a pair, and Mink is cheating with Bernie.
3. **Verna/Tom/Leo love triangle** – Leo and Verna are engaged to be married, but Tom is sleeping with Verna, despite being Leo's best friend and advisor.
4. **Tom owes Lazar money** – Tom is addicted to gambling and owes his bookie, Lazar a lot of money. Although Leo and Caspar both try to help him, Tom insists on paying it off himself despite being extremely unlucky.
5. **Irish mafia vs. Italian mafia** – At the beginning of the film, the Irish crime family is clearly in charge, but they lose ground to the Italians when Leo is nearly assassinated. Tom switches sides and acts as a double agent.
6. **Culture Clash** – In addition to the war between the Irish and Italians, we see judgment of the Jewish characters (Bernie and Verna), and the homosexual characters (Eddie, Mink & Bernie).