

Magnifying Magnetism: Representing the Leadership of Lincoln and Thatcher

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Abraham Lincoln and Margaret Thatcher are two historically and politically interesting and important figures. Lincoln, the 16th President of United States of America, was undoubtedly one of the most celebrated leaders of the country who abolished slavery with the 13th amendment and promised a new beginning for the country- a beginning filled with freedom, new hopes, justice and equality. On the other hand, the United Kingdom witnessed the rise and fall of Margaret Thatcher the first woman Prime Minister who served the office from 1979- 1990. Under her leadership the country saw great political transformation. Her obdurate politics and her hard-hitting leadership brought her the nickname “The Iron lady”. Though a radical in some matters, she was conservative in the others and was often criticized for the same.

These leaders have been interesting topics for writers, poets, artist, film makers and performing artist. They have appeared repeatedly in various works. Lincoln has remained a much-loved topic for many American writers and often appears as the saviour of the country and represented in positive light by these artist. Some of the famous works in literature where Lincoln appears are Jules Verne’s 1870 novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, *Abraham Lincoln*, *Vampire Hunter* (novel) and *Assassin* (Myers novel). He was a favourite subject for Walt Whitman where he appeared in various of Whitman’s works such as “O Captain! My Captain!” 1865, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”, 1865 and “Hush’d Be the Camps To-Day”. Not only in literature, Lincoln remained a favourite topic for singers and film makers. Martin and John’s *Abraham*, written by Dick Holler, recorded by Dion (1968) was a famous song. He appeared as a character in various Hollywood movies such as *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*,

Young Mr. Lincoln, The Conspirator and Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter. (2012).

Similarly Thatcher has also invited a lot of attention for herself in literature and other art forms. Though Thatcher is considered as the most esteemed P.M, what is interesting to see is that she is often depicted as the hate-filled character in popular culture. In Literature Thatcher has appeared in various works such as *The Line of Beauty* by Alan Hollinghurst (2004), *Alan Clark Diaries: Volume 2: Into Politics 1972–1982*, *Icon* by Frederick Forsyth (1997), *The Negotiator* by Frederick Forsyth (1989), *First Among Equals* by Jeffrey Archer (1984) and *Jeffrey Archer: The Truth*. Various songs composed on her are “*All My Trials*” by Paul McCartney, “*Margaret on the Guillotine*” (song from Morrissey’s album *Viva Hate*) and “*Stand Down Margaret*” by The Beat. In Hollywood she appeared in *Back in Business* (2007), *I Am Bob* (2007), *For Your Eyes Only* (1981).

Two recent Hollywood movies made on these characters are *Lincoln* and *The Iron Lady*. It is interesting to see how these characters are presented on the silver screen and more importantly, how these leaders have influenced directors to make cinema around them.

Lincoln has always been depicted as an iconic character. According to critics, Spielberg’s *Lincoln* comes about as close to humanizing Lincoln as one could hope. The movie begins with the 4th year of the American War. *Lincoln* deals with the passage of the 13th amendment. Steven Spielberg directs Daniel Day-Lewis in *Lincoln*, a revealing drama that focuses on the President’s tumultuous final months in office. It is not a typical biopic which tries to track the journey of the leader. Instead, Spielberg and writer Tony Kushner (‘*Munich*’) – drawing on a book by historian Doris Kearns Goodwin – takes us into the backrooms disputing and public bombast that led to the 13th Amendment to the US constitution, outlawing slavery.

It focuses on the one-month period: January 1865, which could be argued that Abraham Lincoln won his greatest victory. This was a period when the nation was divided by war and the strong winds of change. Lincoln pursues a course of action designed to end the war, unite the country and abolish slavery. He appears as a strong leader with the ethical heroism and unyielding willpower to thrive whose choices during such critical moments will change the fate of generations to come.

Lincoln, bring the past vividly to life. One cannot get as close to the real-life figure as one does while watching Spielberg's movie. By showing the private and public struggle to both free the slaves and end the war, *Lincoln* paints a powerful and compelling portrait of the man who has become an icon.

The opening scene presents Lincoln as the headstrong war weary President and the love and warmth of the President. It establishes Lincoln as a great leader who has a purpose to fulfil. Lincoln himself (Daniel Day-Lewis in near-perfect makeup) sits on a chair, observing the now-calm battlefield. He interviews two black soldiers, one of whom is deferential, the other confrontational, demanding that blacks receive equal compensation for their service to the Union. Lincoln humours him, but it becomes clear early in the film that considerations of racial equality are a political bother to this president. He wants to win the war, and he wants to abolish slavery by passing the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. More radical advocacy of racial equality will only get in the way of achieving these righteous ends.

The movie presents the true picture of Lincoln - the man rather than Lincoln the iconic character. Spielberg's version tries to humanize this almost iconic like figure without trying to deconstruct his greatness. This takes place with strong screenplay, witty dialogues and intelligently written playwright. This Abe slaps his eldest son (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) in a fit of rage; he punishes his already pitiful wife (Sally Field), lamenting the day he decided against

institutionalizing her; he even considers abandoning abolition altogether, simply to win peace with the Confederacy before more blood is shed on both sides. Every word he speaks seems to emerge from a deep reservoir of intelligence, grace, humility, and realism. This Lincoln is a man who belongs, in the words of the doctor who pronounced his death, “to the ages.” It might be easy to present an iconic character either a “good” or “evil” but Spielberg and Kushner take the challenging road, attempting instead to understand what makes Lincoln a great man and what made him a man.

Lincoln is not a straightforward biopic or even a simple character study. *Lincoln* is part character study and part period piece political thriller. It’s about all the tactics, employed by Lincoln to forge the dual-party coalition necessary in the House of Representatives to pass the 13th Amendment. Repeatedly, President Lincoln gets challenged by his adversaries who claim his actions are undemocratic or antidemocratic. Lincoln counters that his task is to uphold democracy in the longer term by whatever means necessary and to let the American people stand as judge. Towards the end of the movie, he even goes so far as to posit that the Union he has fought to preserve is, in essence, one that hasn’t yet existed, that the democracy he is trying to build is one that is still in a state of becoming.

It also happens to be amongst the most visually restrained of any of Spielberg’s films. The movie has a profound theatrical quality, with its emphasis on dialogue, interior monologues, such as Lincoln’s Cabinet meetings and the debates about the 13th Amendment in the House, endless anecdotes and simple and unpretentious memories, quotes from Shakespeare, the Bible and Euclid. These are used to make Lincoln’s ideas more clear and persuasive, getting masses to do what is right and knowing what is right and wrong.

In humanizing Abe Lincoln, Spielberg does not undermine the character’s greatness. *Lincoln*’s closing scene again leaves the audience with his iconic speech, reminding Lincoln the iconic leader that he was. Assassination of Lincoln takes place off-screen. We are informed

through another character about Lincoln's death. Spielberg does so, so that the audience leaves the theatre with Lincoln, the great man rather than the killing of the man.

With Daniel Day Lewis the character of Abe Lincoln comes to life in its truest sense. He was possibly the best choice to play this iconic character with his towering performance and interpretation of Lincoln, as a calm self-confident, patient and his willingness to play politics in a realistic way. Daniel Day Lewis surpasses them with a performance that blends divine humanity with brass-balls fortitude.

With a similar performance and an enactment which captures the magnificent persona of a leader is Meryl Streep in *The Iron Lady*. One of the reviews said "Streep's performance is so true and so uncannily accurate, so full and so complete in its understanding, that she is fascinating every second she is onscreen". Margaret Thatcher has been an interesting character to be studied in cultural representation. Thatcher, unlike Lincoln, is not somebody who is loved by people. She invites either extreme criticism or extreme appreciation. It then becomes interesting to see how this controversial character, who is also a woman, is presented on the big screen. It is no doubt that like Daniel- Day Lewis; Meryl Streep is the perfect choice to play this debated character. Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), the United Kingdom's first and so far the only female prime minister, served from 1979 until 1990. During her time in office, she reduced the influence of trade unions, privatized certain industries, scaled back public benefits. Nicknamed the "Iron Lady," she opposed Soviet communism and fought a war to maintain control of the Falkland Islands. The longest-serving British prime minister of the 20th century, Thatcher was eventually pressured into resigning by members of her own Conservative Party.

Phyllida Lloyd's biopic portrays Thatcher's formative and early political years."The Iron Lady" like "Lincoln" is not really about the historical record, it presents the more subjective terrain of memories

— cherished and bitter — and wavering mental faculties. The movie unfolds in a series of flashbacks. Though the film pays lip service to Mrs. Thatcher's analytic intelligence and tactical shrewdness, its focus is on the drama and pathos of her personal life. The movie does not portray her as *a heroine nor as a monster*. Critics do not consider this as a good biopic and considers it as nothing more than a movie which depicts the mental breakdown of a political leader. However, the movie traces the rise and falls of an esteemed PM and also depicts the issues confronted by a woman in a world which belonged to the men.

Interestingly, the film makers do not take a stand- she is neither the heroine nor the monster.

The movie begins with Thatcher's presentation as the young headstrong woman who wants to do something, who dreams to bring a change. One of the 20th century's most eminent and significant women, Thatcher came from nowhere to crash through barriers of gender and class to be heard in a male dominated world. While studying Thatcher one cannot ignore the feminist approach which she invites with her dynamic façade and boldness. Thatcher was very well aware about the obstacles that she would face as a woman while stepping into the political arena of the country. Some scenes in the movie very well depict her difficult journey- the journey of a woman in the world of man. We get effective scenes of young Margaret ([Alexandra Roach](#)) insisting on living a life of consequence. Later, Thatcher's distinctiveness is emphasized, with shots of her overhead, a lone woman in colourful dresses in a sea of blue suits, or as the only pair of high heels in a row of black wingtips or the only pearl necklace in the world of ties. This Thatcher—headstrong and ambitious—doesn't want to be relegated to the back rooms with the other ladies. She's idealistic enough to realize that she can do more.

Her political career eventually gets under way and after losing an election at the age of twenty-four, she eventually wins a seat in Parliament. That seat leads her to a position as Secretary for Education and eventually leads her to victory as Britain's first female prime minister. Yet, even as her career trajectory leads her to victory after hard-earned victory, she's still surrounded by men who undervalue and undermine her.

Halfway through the story, her conservative values and her success as a small government leader shine through—an unexpected development in a Hollywood film. Her advice that “the medicine is harsh but the patient requires it to live” is seen as she takes on political adversaries and engages in a war to keep the Falkland Islands. In one particularly-impressive scene showing Thatcher's unique personality, she talks tough to an American Secretary of State and then gently offers him a cup of tea.

Moreover the movie very well brings forth gender politics into the picture. Thatcher at various junctures in the movie has to make a choice between Margaret the Politician and Margaret the mother. One of the scenes which presents this role clash is where in Margaret is on her way to the Assembly and her kids run behind her car pleading to her to come back.

However, the movie is just not about the Margaret Thatcher's journey into politics, it is more about the transformation of a humble woman into a shrewd and insolent leader. Margaret literally transforms into a leader, once in power we see a complete transformation of her where she is being groomed to speak not shriek, to move well, to win.

As stated earlier the movie tracks the rise and downfall of Thatcher. Thatcher was forced by her party members to resign mainly because many of her party members felt that she was not a leader but a dictator who did what she felt was right. Eventually, the film-makers suggest, Thatcher's increasing isolation, brought about by her rigidity, single-mindedness, inability to accept advice and contempt for most of her

colleagues, brings about a form of madness that foreshadows the Lear-like dementia that infects her declining years.

Thus, Lincoln and The Iron Lady are two remarkable movies which tactfully present two great political leaders and their magnetic leadership which makes them popular even today to be deliberated.

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