

History 152
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Kailua High School
Spring 2025
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Amadeus. Orion Pictures. 1984.

The movie *Amadeus* takes place during the mid-Industrial period. *Amadeus* is based on the play by Peter Shaffer. The movie, as does the play of the same title, begins with the screams of Antonio Salieri, court composer of Emperor Joseph of Austria: "Mozart! Forgive your assassin!" "I confess; I killed you!" The story centers on Salieri who wants people to believe that he killed Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). Salieri's guilt drives him to attempt suicide. He is taken to an asylum where a priest has been sent to take Salieri's confession. We learn that Salieri idolized Mozart: until Salieri met him and discovered that Mozart was a "vulgar, conceited, and spoiled brat." What is worse, Mozart (unknowingly) embarrassed Salieri and in return, Salieri vows to destroy Mozart's career.

Mozart's career, however, will take second priority after Salieri's encounter with Mozart's wife. Her desperation to help Mozart obtain the position of court composer tempts Salieri to exchange his authority for a sexual favor. "You scorn my attempts at virtue," says Salieri, addressing God, "because You are unjust, unfair, unkind--I will block You! I swear it! I will hinder and harm Your creature on earth as far as I am able! I will ruin Your Incarnation!" Salieri doesn't want to ruin just Mozart's career, he wants to destroy Mozart. Salieri's argument with God will be exacerbated after his music is publicly ridiculed by Mozart. "Mock me, go ahead, mock me," Salieri exclaims in the privacy of his quarters after Mozart caricatures Salieri as a piano playing, flatulent goon. But now Mozart has become the instrument of God: God is mocking Salieri who prayed to God to make him a famous

musician, not the laughing stock of bourgeois Vienna. Salieri swears to defeat God by killing his musical creation. The defeat of God will be sweetened by Salieri's cunning manipulation of Mozart to write a requiem for his own funeral. Mozart's cackling laughter, however, will have the last laugh as Salieri's vision of Mozart's funeral will remain a fantasy due to Mozart's untimely death and Constanze's possession of the unfinished Requiem.

An important scene from the movie is when Salieri hatches his scheme for Mozart's demise. Salieri is watching Mozart's "darkest opera," *Don Giovanni*. As the movie cuts back to Salieri's confession, the viewer experiences the madness of Salieri as he unfolds how the "cathedral with Mozart's little coffin will be filled with such music" that Salieri's name will be remembered forever—and that God can do nothing to stop Salieri from attaining the immortality he sought through music. The scene is important because it unleashes Salieri's mad scheme to defeat God and destroy His Creature, Mozart. The scene goes beyond dialogue as the action in Don Giovanni is used by Salieri to hatch his scheme: as Mozart's father still possessed Mozart from the grave, Salieri will possess Mozart with mask and hood from Don Giovanni. The scene lays bare the plot of Salieri's madness.

Historical Commentary: Amadeus takes liberties with the real Mozart. Although some of his compositions may have had no corrections, the notion that Mozart wrote without corrections is more a reflection that he may have had a photographic memory than perfect composition. The movie also portrays Mozart and Constanze as having only one child, but they may have had as many as six children. Although movies embellish or leave out characteristics of historical persons, there is always a message in every work of art. In the movie *Amadeus*, the message is that among us walk those who are gifted, and we should not feel threatened by their existence, but rather we should admire their gifts. At the same time, the movie is a window into the political and social structure of late 18th century Europe. During

discussion of *The Marriage of Figaro*, we learn that Europe is on the threshold of democratic revolution which threatens the status of royalty and its relationship to the Catholic Church. Historical inaccuracies aside, and overwhelming the political and social turmoil about to be unleashed on Europe through democratic revolutions, the viewer is treated to the beautiful architecture of cathedrals and royal life in the court of Austrian Emperor Joseph. And complementing the beauty of cathedrals and palaces, there is the music of Mozart—the sweet, divine longing for fulfillment that pulls humanity to unlimited horizons.

Faces and Masks: Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* from Stage to Screen | Literature Film Quarterly | Find Articles at BNET
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3768/is_200401/ai_n9377433/pg_1?tag=artBody;col

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_Amadeus_Mozart