Sam Sees the Light

I Am Sam is a poignant movie about a mentally retarded man named Sam who is fighting for custody of his daughter, Lucy. In one particularly striking scene, he and his lawyer, Rita, argue after a disastrous hearing about how Sam can get Lucy back. Sam is convinced that Lucy does not need him anymore because she has a new family. Rita, who is very aggressive and determined, tries to make him understand that they can keep fighting for Lucy. Sam reacts with frustration and says that she does not understand how he feels because she is “perfect.” In a powerful monologue, Rita pours her heart out to Sam about how catastrophic her life is and how she feels like she fails at everything, a response that Sam was not expecting. A combination of lighting, music, and camera shots accentuate the action within the scene, and help viewers to better understand the relationship between Sam and Rita.

Lighting defines Sam’s mood throughout the scene. The scene opens with the shadows created by the origami wall that Sam is building. A meager amount of light comes from outside. Sam is wearing a black sweater, which darkens his face. This darkness reflects Sam’s hopelessness and depression. Suddenly, the camera shoots Rita, who is outside. Light floods the screen. This light represents Rita’s determination and perseverance. When Sam refuses to come to the door, she kicks it open, bringing light into the room. She takes off her black jacket and sunglasses, brightening her face and allowing viewers to see her facial expressions. After Sam tells Rita that she is perfect and does not understand what he is going through, she knocks over his origami wall, brightening the room even more. By the end of the scene, the room is very
bright, as Rita convinces Sam that he can have Lucy back in his life again. The screen fades to white, a stark contrast from the beginning.

In addition to lighting, the music throughout the scene depicts Sam’s somber mood. Soft yet fast guitar music consisting of repeating notes plays in the background. The music represents Sam’s flood of thoughts. He thinks that Lucy has rejected him, and does not understand why. He feels like he is a failure because he lost her. He has given up hope for the future. The consistency of the notes illustrates Sam’s persistent thought that he will never have Lucy back in his life. The music plays as Sam folds his origami paper and does not stop until Rita tells him to look at her. He concentrates now on what Rita has to say. The music resumes when Rita tells him that he can get Lucy back because does not believe her. However, the music starts to fade away throughout Rita’s monologue as Sam understands that life is hard for people other than himself and that he should strive to make his own life better.

Camera work plays an essential part in conveying to viewers the emotions and actions of the characters. Camera shots are mostly subjective close ups that emphasize the characters’ reactions and facial expressions. The subjective angle enables viewers to feel like they are experiencing the scene from within the room. At one point, the camera shoots between the origami sheets as Sam and Rita look between them at each other. Rita comments on Sam’s kind eyes and viewers are drawn to them because it is the focal point of the camera. When Sam says that Rita is perfect, the camera zooms in quickly on her surprised expression. This shot helps viewers better understand Rita’s perception of herself. During Rita’s monologue, the camera vacillates between Rita and Sam. It emphasizes Rita’s feelings of failure and Sam’s sympathy for her. At the end of the scene, there is a long shot of the two hugging, capturing the essence of their relationship.
Lighting, music, and camera shots, then, are important to this scene of *I Am Sam* because they add to the drama of the situation and establish a caring relationship between Rita and Sam. Rita needs Sam because he looks up to her and makes her feel like she is not a failure. In turn, Sam needs Rita to prevent him from giving up in his battle to keep Lucy in his life. The two characters are a perfect match for each other, and their relationship is strengthened through this pivotal scene.