

HIGH NOON [1952]

by

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It has been estimated that one out of four films made before the mid-1960s were Westerns. That means that since about 35,000 features were released in the 70 years of film, over 5,000 westerns have been screened. This makes the Western the largest genre in film history.

High Noon stands out in this long list, for few have won major awards, were among the top grossing films of the year, or came to be included on list of best American film compiled by critics the world over.

For many, *High Noon* is the first adult western. Previous Westerns had lots of action, true-blue heroes, plotting villains. Compared to other Westerns of the day, *High Noon* very odd for several reasons: it was shot in black & white, no picture-postcard scenery. And, breaking one of the rules of Hollywood Western tradition, the hero admits he's afraid.

The plot is pretty straightforward: A town Marshall, must deal with various religious and moral disagreements with his new bride. In addition, after the townsfolk abandon him, he must face a gang of deadly killers alone at “high noon,” when a train arrives carry the gang leader, an outlaw he arrested and sent to prison years ago.

In its day, *High Noon* made some people angry, and it still does. While the surface ideology is straightforward, a man alone driven to do what he must do, there are other interpretations. Screenwriter Carl Foreman intended the film to be a parable for Communist investigations into Hollywood by Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). From 1947 to 1951 over 300 actors, writers, directors, and other Hollywood film employees were “blacklisted” and prevented from working. Foreman was an “unfriendly” witness and was blacklisted (as was actor Lloyd Bridges and cinematographer Floyd Crosby). Ironies piled upon ironies. Foreman left for Europe thinking this would be his filmic limbo. However, he wrote script for *Bridge on the River Kwai* [1957] for which he received no credit. However, when the Academy awarded the film the Best Picture, the auditorium was fill with awkward sideways glances.

The ironies, however, did not end there. The opening of *High Noon* was picketed by Hollywood's conservative elements (which included then actor and union president Ronald Reagan). (I highly recommend Glenn Frankel's outstanding book, "High Noon – The Hollywood Blacklist and the Making of an American Classic," Bloomsbury press, NY, 2017.) While criticized in the US by conservatives as Communist influenced, *Pravda* lambasted it as "a glorification of the individual."

The film, in addition to the wonderful and complex moral study in the story, is full of visual pleasures. For instance, the clock becomes a central metaphor. Clocks become bigger as film progresses. Pendulums move slower. And they stop at high noon.

Cinematographer Floyd Crosby and director Zinneman studied the look of Matthew Brady's Civil War photos. The film has the visual feel of a documentary. Shot in high contrast, blank skies, no clouds, everything is serene and dry. When it saw the rushes, the studio almost fired Crosby for his "incompetent work."

Apparently, America – and Hollywood – were waiting for an "adult" Western. The film earned four Academy Awards: Best Score (Dmitri Tiomkin), Best Song (Dmitri Tiomkin), Best Editing (Harry W. Gersad & Elmo Williams), and Best Actor (Gary Cooper). It was also nominated for Best Director (Fred Zinneman), Best Film and Best Screenplay (Carl Foreman). It earned four Golden Globe Awards: Best Actor (Gary Cooper), Best Supporting Actress (Katy Jurado), Best Cinematography (Floyd Crosby), Best Music (Dmitri Tiomkin).

In addition to the "adult-ness" of the plot, the filmmakers wove into the film a symbolic and textual depth unseen before in Westerns. For instance, in the exact opposite of the Western tradition, the marriage takes place at the beginning of the film rather than at its conclusion.

The screenplay has given considerable meaning and depth to the characters' names. Most appropriately "Amy" means "beloved" (a combination of the Latin *Amata* and the French *Ameé*). "Will" is pretty obvious – will power, movement into the future. Kane can be as supportive (cane) or as a symbol of growth (as in a cane plant). It may also be a reference of *Citizen Kane*, for Orson Welles was also a fighting outsider who was hounded out of Hollywood. And "Helen" is pretty obvious as a reference to one of the most powerful women in history, Helen of Troy.

The interpersonal relationships between the characters are complex and fluid. In one scene, for instance, the relation between Mrs. Ramirez and Mrs. Kane begins in one position, moves during their conversation, and ends where they have essentially changed places. This is seen not only ideologically, but physically: Kane begins in front of white wall, Ramirez in front of black door. By the end of the scene, their ideological changes are clearly represented by the changes in their backgrounds.

There are many social and political comments peppered throughout the film. Almost everyone in the film displays cowardice. Some for personal reasons, most for the

sake of business and money: the judge, the deputy sheriff and his friends, the town's businessmen, the cowboys, the church goers, even the children. The town's racial prejudice is well hidden: Helen Ramirez owns half the town, but secretly. Openly, she can own the saloon, but not the store. She is apparently the mistress to the most powerful man in town.

Two Indians can be seen outside the saloon as Ben Miller rides up. I believe that these Indians, the only ones in the whole film, are symbols of savagery and are used to define and describe Ben Miller. These would be typical of the Western genre's stereotypical and hateful use of Indians in the past.

Perhaps the most unexpected aspect of *High Noon* is its delving into numerology. Both 3 and 4 are recurring numbers in this film. In Jungian psychology, three has connections with process. On the evil side are the three cowboys at the train station, the number three on the train; on the good side are the three men who offer to help Will Kane and the number 3 on Helen Ramirez's hotel room. Four occurs on both side of the scale to indicate completion: Frank Miller returns to kill Kane while Amy joins in the battle with her husband.

Which brings us to the gunfight – again like not other western both in detail and in conception. Cowboys specifically take of their spurs – not to make noise. One of the cowboys breaks window to get lady's hat which alerts Kane to their presence (you can what you want of the symbolism). When Amy comes back from the train into the Marshall's office, a gun prominently displayed on wall next to her. She puts head down on desk, the same gesture as Kane a few moments before – they are joined. And, most surprising given the Hollywood western tradition – Amy shoots unarmed man in the back!

The give this film even more depth is the cinematography. The camera is constantly used to give is information that is not in the "text." For instance, at the beginning of the film, the three evil cowboys ride into town past a church – a visual comparison, we assume, between the extremes of good and evil. However, it doesn't quite turn out that way, for the churchgoers have their own problems. Later, after Kane begs for help, the children are allowed to leave the church. When Will Kane has been denied help, he too leaves the church to see the children tugging at a rope from two side – a visual representation of his own moral dilemma.

Similarly, the wedding is a joining of extremes – and an immediate parting. Other men are more passionate at Will Kane's own wedding. He gives his bride an embarrassed peck while his friends kiss and hug her. In the background during the wedding reception is a rack of guns – predicting the role of the guns in their relationship throughout the rest of the film.

Another powerful visual symbol is Harvey's gun. After he hangs it up on the Marshall's Office wall, it keeps recurring as a visual symbol – primarily associated with Amy. Finally, she uses Harvey's gun to save her husband's life. While Harvey is clearly

associated with immature, Oedipal sexuality, Amy is burdened with another kind of immaturity – one which Helen accuses her of. While Harvey can never come to terms with his, Amy (in the terms laid down by the film) comes to grips with her and finally learns that her place is, as Helen has stated, “to fight next to her husband.” Thus, for Amy, Helen is a positive mother figure. In her mother role, Helen then becomes the Oedipal mother for Harvey.

Helen Ramirez is not the typical 1950’s woman. She is powerful, independent and in charge of her own sexuality – clearly, she chooses her men. And powerful men: first Frank Miller, then Will Kane. She’s obviously not terribly serious about Harvey, “You’re a nice boy with broad shoulders.” She has a male secretary, and she apparently owns half the town. We get some hint as to how she acquired her money: according to the slimy hotel clerk, before Miller’s imprisonment the hotel was very busy. We must assume that it was a place of prostitution. We must also assume that Helen was in charge of the business, the madam. For this reason, she is addressed as Mrs. Ramirez not, as Amy is quickly corrected, Miss Ramirez. Ramirez is quite the opposite of the 1950’s women portrayed in most of the media: Donna Reed, Luci, Mrs. Cleaver.

The old Marshall’s name is Sam Fuller – I have often wondered if this is a reference or an homage to the director Sam Fuller? (he’s done well over a dozen Westerns if you include the TV episodes. Among the films are *I Shot Jesse James* [1949], *The Baron of Arizona* [1950], *Forty Guns* [1957], and *The Deadly Trackers* [1973].)

Directed by Fred Zinneman, written by Carl Foreman, and John W. Cunningham, Cinematography by Floyd Crosby, Music by Dimitri Tiomkin. Starring Gary Cooper, Thomas Mitchell, Lloyd Bridges, Katy Jurado, Grace Kelley, Otto Kruger, Lon Chaney Jr., Harry Morgan, Ian MacDonald, Lee Van Cleef.