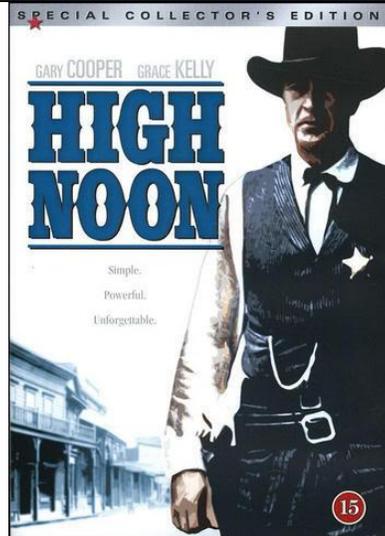


High Noon (Fred Zinnemann, 1952)



Most of us don't encounter moral dilemmas that could be described as a matter of life and death. If you were an early Christian, your response to the question "Are you a Christian?" might fall into that category. If you were living in the United States in the 50s, your response to the question "Are you or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" might fall into that category. Decisions on risking your life don't always have the clear-cut simplicity of, say, jumping into a river to save a little girl clinging to a log. Suppose instead it's a question of risking your life to save a person who has had every opportunity to save himself but refused? The question becomes more complicated.

Now suppose you are the partner of someone who is going down a path you consider so morally repugnant that you feel compelled to leave? From the perspective of personal authenticity, this is a legitimate decision to make. Now suppose instead that you threaten departure in an effect to manipulate your partner's decision. This puts you in a less defensible moral position. These are the kinds of questions we encounter in "High Noon," a movie reviled by fans of traditional westerns (John Wayne, for example, hated the movie) but hailed as a study in personal integrity.

Source: Screenplay by Carl Foreman.

"Foreman's agent found the story familiar, and John Cunningham's 1947 short story 'The Tin Star' was traced. It is not clear whether Foreman had read the story, but he accepted that he may well have done, and that he had perhaps been guilty of unconscious plagiarism." [Drummond, p.31] So he bought the movie rights to the story, just in case.

Director: Fred Zinnemann.

Liked "studies in threatened integrity." *Made From Here to Eternity* (1953), *A Nun's Story* (1959), *A Man for All Seasons* (1966)

What is the movie about?

A retired marshal, abandoned by those who should be his allies, in a conflict of love vs. duty, risks his life to fight four outlaws.

The Music of "High Noon"

Song, "Don't forsake me, O my darling," the first song in movie history to be independently released
Practically all the incidental music consists of fragments of the song melody

- The text of the song, "a first person address by the hero to his bride appealing for solidarity" gives open expression to feelings that Will Kane keeps inside. [Drummond, p.63]

- Contrary to usual scoring practice, the music is mostly played by lower strings, giving a dark, stark sound
- Contrary to usual practice, the film begins not with the symphonic fanfare, but a simple tune sung by Tex Ritter

Clip 1 (Paying a Visit, 2:00)

Simple song summarizes the story

How do you know that this is what it is about?

“A retired marshal”

Will Kane (Gary Cooper) marries Amy (Grace Kelly) and takes off his marshal’s badge. They plan to run a store together.

Departs from traditional model. Will Kane is old. Director Fred Zinnemann instructed actor Gary Cooper to “look tired” throughout the movie, not a difficult task considering that he was in constant pain from arthritis, back problems, and an ulcer.

Cooper won an Academy Award for Best Actor for this performance.

Clip 2 (Wedding Day, 5:00)

Wedding intercut with arrival of three outlaws identified by the barber. Telegraph operator runs away after establishing noon as the time when Frank Miller will arrive on the train. Wedding establishes all the friends who will desert Will Kane.

“abandoned by those who should be his allies”

Reasons for desertion:

1. Principles (Amy, a converted Quaker, whose father and brother were shot to death)

Clip 3 (Got to Stay, 3:30)

Kane puts on his holster; Amy delivers her ultimatum. She won’t wait to find out whether she’s going to be a wife or a widow.

2. Jealousy (Harvey, the deputy)

Clip 4 (Not Buying It, 5:30)

Deputy Harvey Pell lets Kane down—will help only if Kane agrees to make him marshal.

3. Cowardice (the judge who departs town; the friend who hides)

Clip 5 (Not Going Anywhere, 4:30)

Kane’s friend hides from him, ordering his wife to lie for him

4. Self-interest (councillor Jonas Henderson, who believes a violent shootout would create a bad image for the town)

Jonas Henderson sums up the debate by first complimenting Kane: “What this town owes Will Kane here it can never repay with money - and don't ever forget it. He's the best marshal we ever had. Maybe the best marshal we'll ever have. So if Miller comes back here today, it's our problem, not his. It's our problem because this is our town. We made it with our own hands out of nothing. And if we want to keep it decent, keep it growing, we've got to think mighty clear here today. And we've gotta have the courage to do what we think is right, no matter how hard it is.”

While he believes Miller is the town's concern and problem, a violent shoot-out would also create a bad image for Hadleyville up North, especially for financial growth and investment support from Northern business interests:

All right. There's gonna be fighting when Kane and Miller meet and somebody's gonna get hurt, that's for sure. Now, people up North are thinking about this town - thinking mighty hard. Thinking about sending money down here to put up stores and to build factories. It'll mean a lot to this town, an awful lot. But if they're gonna read about shooting and killing in the streets, what are they gonna think then? I'll tell ya. They're gonna think this is just another wide-open town and everything we worked for will be wiped out. In one day, this town will be set back five years. And I don't think we can let that happen.

And so, because of the necessity of the town's commercial self-interests and the preservation of public relations, respectable businessman Henderson advises Kane ("a mighty brave man, a good man") to flee town for the good of the local economy:

Mind you, you all know how I feel about this man. He's a mighty brave man, a good man. He didn't have to come back here today. And for his sake and the sake of this town, I wish he hadn't. Because if he's not here when Miller comes, my hunch is there won't be any trouble, not one bit. Tomorrow, we'll have a new Marshal. And if we can all agree here to offer him our services, I think we can handle anything that comes along. And to me, that makes sense. To me, that's the only way out of this. Will, I think you'd better go while there's still time. It's better for you, and it's better for us.

Encapsulated in the church scene, showing how easily people can be swayed, and represented visually by the children's tug of war

Clip 6 (Special Deputies, 8:00)

The church scene, in which Kane's friend, Jonas Henderson, the town councillor, betrays him for the sake of economic interests.

5. Cynicism (the retired marshal)

Mark (Lon Chaney, Jr.), the old, retired marshal who has been Kane's friend and mentor, considers the lawman's life as meaningless. "You risk your skin catching killers, and the juries turn them loose so they can come back and shoot at you again. If you're honest, you're poor your whole life, and in the end you wind up dying all alone on some dirty street. For what? For nothing, for a tin star." (nihilistic view) [Nolletti, p.90]

Clip 7 (All For Nothing, 4:00)

Kane visits Matt Howe, the ex-marshal and Kane's mentor, who gives a cynical speech.

Repeated image of Kane walking **alone** down the main street

"in a conflict of love vs. duty"

Typical opera plot (cf. *Dido and Aeneas*, in which Aeneas' duty leads him to Italy to found Rome).

Duty always wins, which mostly makes for tragedies

A genuine conflict: Will Kane has no desire to die. He wants to spend his life with the woman he has just married. He turns around and returns to town.

Internal drama: a crisis of conscience with images of loneliness and isolation

"risks his life to fight four outlaws"

- Frank Miller, a man Kane arrested and sent to prison for murder, is returning to town on the noon train. Miller has sworn to kill Kane, and three members of his old gang await his arrival.
- Will Kane believes he will die: completes his last will and testament

Clip 8 (Train's Coming, 3:00)

Kane writes his last will and testament as we see a montage of all the people who have let him down.

How does the director tell the story in visual terms?

Zinnemann's ideas about directing: "To me being a director is comparable to being the chef in a restaurant. Let's say you have a chef who is famous for making a very good soup, and he has associates who supply the various ingredients. The writer invents the recipe, and so forth; but director is still the only one who creates the soup from the recipe, who brings it to reality. The producer is the owner of the restaurant." [Nolletti, p.12]

"My imagination starts with the visual end of it so that, after reading the script the first thing I saw in my head were the railroad tracks pointing to the horizon, which never allow the audience to see beyond the horizon, except to know that whatever bad news comes, it would come from there. Then it occurred to me that it would be interesting to see in contrast the marshal moving about all the time. So we had a static main theme and a dynamic second theme. And that was then accentuated by the urgency of time—the clocks—which gave a strong and growing feeling of time being your enemy. So that's how the visuals came to exist. When it came to what the story was about, as you probably know, it seems to mean different things to different people. To me, it was a simple thing. To me, it's a picture of conscience as against compromise: how far one can follow one's conscience before having the compromise—just that, nothing else. [Nolletti, p.15]

"High Noon had a camera that didn't move all that much, but when it moved—like in the boom shot—there was a reason for it, and it expressed something. It expressed the loneliness of a man who very probably is going to be killed, with no one else wanting to know anything about helping him." [Nolletti, p.23]

1. Visual rhythms of storytelling

- Static—the railway tracks—threat from beyond the horizon
- Active—the marshal—constantly in motion, black against a white sky.
- Urgent—the continual reference to clocks in a story designed to play out in real time. As time passes, the clocks get bigger and bigger and the pendulums move more and more slowly

2. Visual style

- Studio producers ready to fire cinematographer Floyd Crosby
- Visual style based on Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs
- Lack of filtering; high contrast between black and white: aimed at a documentary style—a gritty, newsreel, hard-edged look as the entire story unfolds in the Sunday morning heat
- Unusual realism for the time: dirt, bruises, sweat

3. Film acting vs. stage acting

- Reaction instead of action. Kane's appearances in the film mostly consist of negotiation and confrontation.
- Watch Gary Cooper's eyes: we see his frustration, disappointment, fear. The story is told through walks and looks more than words.
- Not an invulnerable hero. Kane fully expects to die (his last will and testament, followed by tears)

Larger issues

1. ostracism of Jews in Austria

“Zinnemann’s experiences as a Jew in Austria may have made him exceptionally keen to the agonising dilemma faced by Kane, deserted and made a scapegoat by his community and by people he believed were his friends. In Austria, a Jew was an outsider, a threat to the country’s culture.” [Nolletti, p.85]

2. blacklisting of writers and actors in Hollywood

American Communist Party stood for rights for poor people, support for labour unions, improvements in welfare and unemployment benefits. Attracted many in the film industry during the 1940s, when the Soviet Union was a wartime ally of the United States.

Loyalty questions: “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” Such membership was not and had never been illegal. 1947: ten directors and writers were cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to give testimony to the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Then black-listed by a group of studio executives. Firing of the Hollywood Ten. Supreme Court denied review of their contempt convictions. Many refused to testify, citing their Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination. But those who “took the Fifth” were added to the blacklist. The HUAC witch hunt destroyed families and ruined careers.

Carl Foreman refused to confirm or deny membership in the Communist Party. (He did in fact belong between 1938 and 1942). Blacklisted.

Last time Carl Foreman’s name appeared on a film—black-listed Gary Cooper threatened to walk off if Foreman’s name was removed from the credits. Pressure on Cooper—back down or your career is over. Foreman moved to London.

A parable for brave people deserted by their friends during the HUAC investigations. Liberals became very suspect during this period.

3. unconventional treatment of women

- Helen Ramirez (Katie Heraldo), a Mexican woman, has the financial power in the town as owner of the hotel and the general store
- Amy Fowler is a “complex and autonomous character. She is at odds both with her husband and with her family in St. Louis, and by the time she gets aboard the noon train she has lost a father, brother, and a husband.” [Drummond, p.76]
- Female bonding across racial lines, reinforced visually through shots of the women together, watching and waiting

Helen Ramirez as pivot

“High Noon has three main storylines. One is the story of the relationship between Will Kane and Frank Miller, a story in which the past erupts into the present and which results in a fearful re-enactment of an ancient drama. The second, triggered by the first, is the story of the interrupted marriage of Will Kane and Amy Foster, when Kane’s commitment to a final confrontation with Miller obliges Amy to leave him in defense of her Quaker principles. The third triangulates with the first two. It is the story of Kane’s relations with a series of townsfolk—and, in certain cases, their negotiations with each other—to support him in his struggle against Miller.” [Drummond, pp.45-46]
Helen Ramirez ties these stories together:

- she has been the mistress of Frank Miller, Will Kane, and Harvey Pell
- She is linked to the townspeople as the silent partner in the ownership of the general store
- She helps persuade Amy to turn back to rejoin her husband and become his only “deputy” in the final shoot-out.

4. Not a typical hero

- Will Kane loses his temper, then apologizes
- In public he hides his doubts; in private, he shows fear, resignation, tears

Will is a man—when with others, he never shows doubts but alone, he is angry, frustrated, bitter, and finally downright frightened.

How many actors could play this role? (turned down by Gregory Peck, Marlon Brando, Charlton Heston, and Montgomery Clift) John Wayne hated the movie

Will Kane was terrified but he rose above his fears. He’s not a superhero.

5. Not a typical western

No panorama, no beautiful clouds, not a lot of action in the usual sense, and not in colour: stark, arid, real

Clip 9 (Everything Ready? 3:00; Fight For It, 7:00; Got Her Now 3:30)

Climax and conclusion.

“Film’s most memorable shot—a dramatic verse high-crane shot in broad daylight, the camera pulling up and away from the lone, abandoned and frightened figure of the Marshal, leaving him dwarfed by buildings on either side of the town’s dusty street.” [Dirks] Zinnemann borrowed the camera-crane from George Stevens, who was shooting Shane next door. [Drummond, p.32]

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