

Note: This essay was given a final grade of 81% (B) because of a type I (subject-verb agreement) error and problems with semicolons. For history's sake those errors have not been corrected here.

Looking for Honor at High Noon

Kristopher T. Marks, April 05, 2002

From the beginnings of cinema until the 1960's, most western films were low-budget works with B-list actors playing two-dimensional characters traveling from one violent action scene to the next. But in 1952 Fred Zinnemann broke that mold with High Noon, a slow-paced western that was more character study than action movie. While some elements of this story were controversial and brought negative attention to its creators, the change of pace and quality in execution was certainly appreciated: High Noon won four Oscar awards (of seven nominations), four Golden Globes, two New York Film Critics Circle Awards, and a handful of other acknowledgments.

High Noon is, at its essence, a moral statement. A case study in duty and responsibility, going all out even when doing so is difficult and unrequired. A man putting his life and marriage on the line for people of a town who don't seem to care what happens to him or their neighbors. That character, Will Kane (played brilliantly by an extremely sick Gary Cooper), postponed his honeymoon indefinitely in order to defend the town against a gang of four outlaws seeking revenge against him for sending one of their members to prison years earlier. Kane had retired from his position as town Marshal and was leaving town for good when news of the approaching gang delayed those plans indefinitely. No other person in town would take initiative to oppose the band of criminals and their new marshal was a day away - so Will felt obligated to ignore his fears and

step back into the job of lawman one last time.

The first hurdle Kane crossed was his new bride, Amy Fowler (portrayed by ever-stunning Grace Kelly). Any woman would be upset by a delay in honeymoon plans, but the situation was made worse here because Amy was a Quaker - a religious group of pacifists who believe in nonviolent resolutions for every problem. Her religious beliefs were the reason Will Kane gave up being Marshal in the first place, so she was naturally none too happy with his decision to pick up a gun and confront the gang and its murderous plans. She was so upset that informed Will of her plans to leave town on the next train if he failed to change his mind. But Will Kane could not abandon what he saw as his duty to the community.

Unfortunately, the town itself felt no such duty towards Will or even towards itself. One by one the locals hid behind locked doors or told Will that he would have no help and should run. The occupants of the community watering hole, already hard at working towards achieving drunkenness early on a Sunday, refused Kane's multiple requests for assistance. Even the upright citizens in church debated and eventually ignored Kane's plight after he interrupted their service. None of the town's regular deputies were willing to stand with our protagonist either, running off to hide instead of joining Will in defense of the town. One of those deputies almost beat the Marshal unconscious trying to make him leave town before the noon train arrived with its ominous passenger.

None of this dissuaded Will from defending the town, of course. He waited in the street at noon, fully prepared to meet the men seeking his demise. Not

without fears or concerns, but in spite of them, driven forward by duty to ignore those doubts and take care of the task at hand. The easiest way out, arresting or killing the gang members before they had broken the law, was never an option for this duty-bound former lawman. Even when the gang corners him in a burning livery stable, Kane does his duty and frees all the panicked horses there before escaping himself.

Will Kane stood up for the right thing in spite of rejection, attack, and danger. His refusal to back down eventually resulted in the town's salvation and a higher level of respect from his wife. People who so eagerly hid when Will needed help were appreciative of his actions and came out to cheer him. A close look at High Noon reveals a very deep moral truth: Those who do their duty and embody justice will be rewarded in the end.