
The Outsider

High Noon and the Conspiracy of the Center

Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*, the critical and popular hit that won an Oscar for Gary Cooper in 1952, opens ominously with three deadbeat gunslingers riding into town while Tex Ritter mournfully warbles *High Noon*'s top-ten theme song: "If I'm a man, I must be brave/ I must meet that deadly killer/ Or lie a coward in my grave." Two of the three men are the Miller brothers, and they mean no good, but not quite yet. It's Sunday, the church bells are ringing, and Marshal Will Kane (Cooper) is in the midst of marrying blond, winsome Amy (Grace Kelly), yet another school-teacher (Quaker, this time) from back East. Kane is planning to retire and settle down with Amy on a ranch of his own. With its celebration of the rituals of community, this could be a Ford western of the cheerful *Clementine* period, but, as we shall see, it isn't.

While Will and Amy are tying the knot, the Millers are on their way to the depot to wait for brother Frank, who's arriving on the noon train. Just released from prison, Frank has sworn to get even with the man who sent him up, and he's heading to Hadleyville to do it. That man, of course, is Will Kane. When it becomes clear that before the day is out, at high noon, to be exact, there will be gunplay between Kane and the Millers, the goodwill that existed between the marshal and the community evaporates like a mirage.

At first, Kane doesn't turn a hair. "This is my town," he reassures Amy. "I have friends here. I'll swear in a bunch of deputies. Maybe there won't even be trouble." But Kane is in for a nasty surprise. The justice of the peace who married them folds up the American flag hanging on the wall of his office and prepares to leave town. He advises Kane to do the same. "This is a dirty little town in the middle of nowhere. Nothing that happens here matters. Get out." The hotel clerk sides with the Millers. "This place

used to be busy when Frank Miller was around. Plenty of people around here think the marshal has a comeuppance coming to him." One man who does volunteer changes his mind when he realizes he's alone: "I got no stake in this. I got a wife and kids." Even Harv (Lloyd Bridges), Kane's deputy, won't lift a finger. He's miffed because he was passed over when Kane's job came up. As if this weren't bad enough, Amy opposes killing on principle. "I don't care who's right and who's wrong," she says. "There's got to be some better way for people to live." She's not fooling, either. She threatens to leave Kane unless he leaves town, ahead of the Millers.

As the clock ticks away, Kane goes into a bar, where the drunken patrons are giving one of the Millers a hero's welcome. Any volunteers? No! Next he walks over to the church, where he expects a better reception from the better element in town. But it's still no go. One parishioner maintains it's a personal thing between Kane and the Millers: "It's not our job." Another disagrees: "It ain't his trouble, it's ours, 'cause it's our town." It looks for a moment like his stirring speech will turn the tide in Kane's favor, when another man stands up. People up North are thinking of sending money down Hadleyville way, he says, to build factories and stores: shooting and killing are bad for business. "I think you better go while there's still time. It's better for you; it's better for us." The appeal to the pocketbook is decisive. Defeated, Kane walks out into the hot sun. Some boys are playing in the dirt. "Bang, bang, you're dead," says one, pointing a toy pistol at him. Even the kids are against him.

When high noon comes, the streets are deserted. Except for Amy, who has an eleventh-hour conversion, Kane doesn't have a friend in the world, and he has to go it alone. Luckily for him, he doesn't need anyone. He shoots the Millers down like the dirty dogs they are. When the gunfight is over and the people pour into the streets to congratulate him, he throws down his badge in the dust, turns his back, and rides out of town.

High Noon is a dark, pessimistic, bitter film. Both Earp in *Clementine* and Kane here find that retirement is premature, that they are forced, once again, to pick up the gun. But Earp does it in the name of consensus, the center, the community, whereas Kane does it in spite of the community. If citizens and ex-lawmen in centrist films pinned on the badge, in radical (extremist) films they threw down the badge.*

*Because "extremist" is a term with negative connotations fully intended by the centrists who coined it, I shall use "radical" to designate those films that attacked the center.

The debate in the church is analogous to the jury process in *12 Angry Men* and the town meeting in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, but the difference is striking. Those films identify with the emerging consensus, whereas *High Noon* denounces it. Consensus is bankrupt, the refuge of fools, knaves, and cowards, and values exist only outside it. Whereas pluralists applauded themselves for their "idealistic" pragmatism and ridiculed extremists for their preoccupation with fundamental questions of right and wrong, which they considered irrelevant and even obstacles to the smooth operation of democracy, *High Noon* does the opposite. The center is ridiculed for its obsession with mean, trivial, business-as-usual affairs, whereas Kane is applauded for his life-and-death confrontation with the Millers. Moreover, Kane can't transform consensus, redeem society, as Fonda did in *12 Angry Men*. Rather, he just gives up and walks

Whom are these people staring at? Why, Marshal Kane (Gary Cooper), of course, who finds that consensus seems different when you're on the outside looking in.



away from it. And of course, once consensus is repudiated, the question who holds authority within the center is irrelevant. Both corporate liberals and conservatives are bad.

High Noon, therefore, attacks both centrist models of the community: the federally focused, top-down model favored by the corporate liberals and the more bottom-up, populist model favored by the conservatives. On the one hand, Hadleyville's solid citizens, the ones with the solid-gold watch fobs, fail Kane in his moment of need. Moreover, it is because of the federal government that Frank Miller is free in the first place. "I sent Miller up five years ago for murder," Kane complains to Amy. "Up North, they commuted it." As a retired lawman tells Kane, "It's a great life. You risk your skin catching killers, and then the government turns them loose to shoot at you again." Kane blames those "up North" for letting Miller go, for coddling criminals. The corporate liberals have stabbed him in the back. The repudiation of Eastern, so-called civilized values associated with corporate liberalism is much stronger in *High Noon* than it is in conservative films, either *Clementine* or *Liberty Valance*. All three films feature schoolteachers from back East. In *Clementine* and *Liberty Valance*, the male pairs—Earp and Holliday, Doniphon and Stoddard—compete for the schoolteacher's favors and fight to possess the values she represents. In *High Noon*, she turns out to be wrong. Her values give way to Kane's.

On the other hand, if the northerners and easterners at the top are flawed, so are the locals at the bottom, right there in Hadleyville, the very people Ford celebrates in *Clementine*, *Fort Apache*, and *Liberty Valance*. Robert Warshaw took producer Stanley Kramer to task for what he called *High Noon*'s "vulgar anti-populism," but the film was made by leftists on the receiving end of the blacklist, who felt betrayed and embattled for the same reasons conservatives felt secure and comfortable. In the fifties, many leftists felt let down by the "people," whom they had courted throughout the thirties and forties. Hence, for all *High Noon*'s contempt for the bourgeoisie, the lowlife (formerly, the salt of the earth) in the bar were little better. Earp is offered help and turns it down. In Hawks's *Rio Bravo* (1959), intended by Hawks as a conservative riposte to *High Noon*, the same thing happens: the townies volunteer unasked to help sheriff Wayne fight off the Burdettes, but Wayne refuses. In *High Noon*, on the other hand, Kane asks for help but doesn't get it. He must depend on himself alone if he hopes to survive. Hadleyville is a bad town, not just

corrupt at the bottom or the top, but through and through, from top to bottom.

We know *High Noon* is a left-wing film because it was made by leftists like Kramer and scriptwriter Carl Foreman, who later said it was. Once the Millers were equated with HUAC or McCarthy, the craven townies became friendly witnesses, as those who cooperated with the witch-hunt were called. "What *High Noon* was about at that time," said Foreman afterward, "was Hollywood, and no other place but Hollywood." But aside from its disdain for business values, it would be difficult to tell *High Noon* apart from a right-wing film. Once stripped of its historical context, it becomes indistinguishable from, say, *Dirty Harry* (1971), which also ends with a lawman throwing down his badge in disgust.

It was no accident that left- and right-wing films resembled each other like two peas in a pod. Radical films generally obscured the difference between right and left in order to create a broad-based coalition against the center. They portrayed themselves as above politics, neither right nor left, but just "moral," and they did so for commercial as well as ideological reasons. The fear of ideological clarity was especially true of left-wing films. By the fifties, they had no real constituency. Communism had never, in spite of HUAC's claims, enjoyed any real purchase on American screens, save for the World War II period, when the fortunes of the U.S. and the USSR temporarily coincided, and even then it was virtually indistinguishable from mainstream New Dealism. In the fifties, what had, a decade before, been thoroughly respectable liberalism was driven underground. The radical right, on the other hand, thrust into the doghouse during the war for its isolationist and neo-Nazi inclinations, made a modest comeback. Rugged individualism—the Big Bertha of its ideological artillery—was, after all, as American as apple pie, and since the right attacked the center too, left-wing films often took on the protective coloration of right-wing films, waging their struggle in the name of individualism, attacking the center for coddling criminals, for being corrupt and conformist, rather than for being a class enemy, the accusation they traditionally flung at their opponents.