

Shane-1952: A Western tragedy of almost Gothic proportions, with Alan Ladd as the quintessential good 'bad' guy...

At first glance, the Western genre is perhaps an unlikely vehicle for tragedy in a grand sense – it probably suffers from more B-movies than any other. An exception, however, is *Shane*, which was produced and directed by one of Hollywood's greats, George Stevens. The plot of the film is well known, to the extent that some may argue it is simple. But the *story* of Shane, as a person, is timeless and complex, being the tragedy of a man unable to escape his past or as he says, towards the end, "A man can't break the mould..."; and three dead killers in the saloon are mute witnesses to that truth.

While there are sub-plots that foreshadow the denouement, Stevens encapsulates the entire tragedy of Shane, visually and symbolically, with the spectacle of the opening and closing sequences – no mean feat, in my opinion. As the Academy Award winning sound track begins, the film opens with Shane – in faded (almost white) buckskin, off-white hat and mounted upon a palomino stallion – beginning a long descent into a scene of natural splendour, a spectacle that symbolically epitomizes "Heaven on Earth", so to speak: the lush valley surrounded by white-capped mountains, and a glittering river meandering through the green pastures. The sun is high, the sky is blue, all is peaceful and Shane's head is high as he traverses, like a white knight, the valley floor to the farmhouse in the distance to meet young Joey, the farmer's son.

When the awful deeds are done, however, and the plot has run its course, the closing contrast is stark, and diametrically opposed to the beginning: wounded physically and emotionally, Shane rides up the mountain trail, with gathering storm clouds above and all around, to leave the valley forever, his buckskins and hat now darkened almost black from the falling rain. The lightning flashes, the thunder rolls and Death, once again, rides a Pale Horse -- but this time, away from all that is Good, in the valley below. His head bowed, his wounded arm sagging at his side, Shane finally reaches the crest of the ridge and disappears from view: *his* Paradise Lost, and the echo of Joey's cry "Shane – come back!" long gone. The *tragedy* for Shane is now complete.

The acting throughout is as near perfect as is possible: casting Alan Ladd as Shane was inspired, because his style of acting matched ideally the quiet, unassuming strength and power of the character of Shane. The only other suitable actor at that time was probably Glenn Ford, but I'm quite happy that Ladd got the part. And the evil personification of the gunfighter Wilson found its rightful place in the hands of Jack Palance, a much under-rated actor whose presence almost steals the movie (I did read somewhere that Jack Palance was, in fact, the fastest on the draw of all Western genre actors in Hollywood!). But, like Bogie's Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* (1941) who had to give up his dream to fight on, so also Alan Ladd's Shane has become the iconic Western good guy' who, despite all his efforts to shake off his past, must still carry on to fight his demons within and those others who continue to ravage his world.

Heartily recommend. And, for what it's worth, that great director/writer of the human comedy, Woody Allen, rates *Shane* as his most favorite movie.

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Rating: 9

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