

To Live in Hadleyville

BY HENRY ALLEN

ONE SUNNY TUESDAY in the worst spring of my life, I cut seventh period at Roosevelt Junior High School and ran half a mile downtown to the Rialto Theater. It was 1955. "High Noon" had been a big hit in 1952, four Oscars. I'd missed it. Now it was back in a matinee.

I had never been the school-cutting type. But that spring I was failing to thrive amid the ambitious go-along-to-get-along smugness of Westfield, N.J., which was everything you were supposed to want in a 1950s suburb. Maybe I thought redemption awaited me at the Rialto.

I put my quarters on the box-office counter. An hour and a half later, redeemed or not, I was changed forever.

So was everyone in the film's Hadleyville. It was everything you wanted in a prospering frontier town, except for the blank glare inspired by the godless skies in Mathew Brady's photographs of corpses bloating on Civil War battlefields.

"Do not forsake me, O my darling, on this our wedding day."

Dimitri Tiomkin's theme song, sung by Tex Ritter, opens the movie as three cowboy thugs ride up to the railroad station to wait for Frank Miller, the pockmarked boss of Hadleyville back when it was a wide-open town. With a pardon, he has escaped the hanging that Gary Cooper's Marshal Will Kane sent him away for.

On that same Sunday morning, Kane is marrying Grace Kelly's Amy, who became a Quaker pacifist since seeing her father and brother killed in gunfights. In deference, Kane resigns as marshal after the wedding. They'll leave town to start a life of storekeeping somewhere. A new marshal is to arrive the next day.

Then the stationmaster bursts in to say Frank Miller is due on the noon train.

The newlyweds get into the wagon that's been waiting with their bags. They gallop out of town until Kane turns back.

Amy protests.

Kane says: "I've got to, that's the whole thing."



A MAN, A MOMENT: Gary Cooper as a Nietzschean figure who rises above survival, heroism and common sense.

He claims, weakly, that they'd be caught unarmed on the prairie. Amy argues that Miller wouldn't be able to find them. He says "I've never run from anyone." But who would blame him for running from four assassins?

He thinks the town will help him. In the next hour—the movie is shot in close to real time—the town he had saved from Miller gives him a lot of reasons to leave and no help at all. Still, he stays. Why?

The town fathers, led by Thomas Mitchell as the mayor, all have reasons to desert him: cowardice, fear that a gunfight will wreck the town's hard-won reputation, or a plausible belief that Kane can leave town and be safe.

Kane's deputy (Lloyd Bridges) refuses to help because Kane didn't recommend him as the new marshal.

His mentor, an arthritic old lawman played by Lon Chaney Jr., says "It's all for nothing, Will."

Kane seeks help at a church service. The minister says: "I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

Amy asks Kane's old girlfriend (the Mexican star Katy Jurado): "Why is he staying?"

"If you don't know, I cannot explain it to you," she replies.

The showdown as existential crisis.

Amy refuses to countenance the coming violence. She tells Kane that if he stays she's leaving town on the train that brings Miller.

Clocks tick and pendulums swing toward noon. As the train arrives, the camera rises in director Fred Zinnemann's famous crane shot, pulling back from a sweating, angst-ridden

Kane until we see him from a hawk's eye view, alone on a dusty street.

At the first gunfire, Amy gets off the train and runs back to town, abandoning her pacifist principles. We cheer her apostasy the way we cheer Kane's suicidal folly. Why?

In the past 60 years, many explanations of "High Noon" have been attempted, but most of them go outside the movie. As in: It's not really about Will and Amy Kane; it's an allegory against Red Scare witch hunters, or in support of them. Or it's about race, gender or bourgeois bad faith.

The case can be made that "High Noon" is also about shifting American concepts of masculinity. Cooper sweats and agonizes unlike traditional western heroes. He reflects the new '50s style of Marlon Brando and James Dean, except that he ends up not just a survivor like Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause" or even a hero like Brando in "On the Wa-

terfront" but a Nietzschean figure who rises above survival, heroism and even common sense.

He is a law unto himself, a sort of renegade who, in one of the many paradoxes of the movie, insists on obeying the law—he even waits for Frank Miller to shoot first. Why?

Only "High Noon" can explain "High Noon." It is no more explainable than Michelangelo's David, a world in itself, self-defining. The artistic genius of the movie is that somehow we utterly support Kane, though we can't say why.

It shows us what existentialism called "authenticity." Kane defines himself by what he does rather than what he is. If his motive is honor, it's an honor so foolish as to be dishonorable. No psychoanalytic agonies drive him—he takes sole responsibility for himself and the people affected by his decision.

With Amy taking up a gun too, Kane wins the fight.

In the sudden silence, the townspeople come out of hiding. They watch as Kane tosses his star in the dust, gets in the wagon and, without a word, drives out of town with Amy. Kane has saved himself and the town from Miller, but the town has lost its soul.

Of course, it wasn't Jean-Paul Sartre that made me cut seventh period to watch "High Noon" again the next three afternoons. As it happened, existentialism didn't reach me until I was a Marine corporal on a troopship heading for Vietnam. Every day I sat on the deck next to staff sergeants playing pinochle while I read Sartre and Dostoyevsky about absurdity, decision, transcendence and meaning. Existentialism seemed to apply in Vietnam, a grim business I had to take care of without knowing precisely why, a bit like staying in Hadleyville, or even going to Roosevelt Junior High School.

Years later I realized that I could describe "High Noon" too in existentialist terms. Not explain it though—nothing explains the movie but the movie.

Mr. Allen, a journalist and critic, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2000 for his writings on photography.