

# Reclaiming Civic Friendship and the Common Good

With *High Noon* (1952),  
*Shane* (1953) and  
*The Big Country* (1958)



Adapted from *Radical Choices in the Crossroads of Life* ©2020 and  
*Shining Light on Our Common Humanity* ©2020 Available on Amazon

# Finding Moral Unity through the Lens of the Imagination: Experiential Learning for a Postmodern Age

*We are all in the same boat in a stormy sea, and we owe each other a terrible loyalty.*  
G. K. Chesterton

Experiencing the sights and sounds of the films in this study guide, we encounter characters who *must* make life and death moral decisions. Along the way we learn certain *essential truths* about human nature. If we choose the common good over self-interest, the bonds of personal, community and civic friendship can be nourished and sustained. The intangible goods of life must be *chosen* over material goods for the sake of human flourishing.



Why does a good story light up our brains and warm our hearts the way it does? Why do we remember so fondly and so clearly a great film we have seen? The answer is found in the human imagination. It is through the cognitive faculty of our imagination that we take in what we see and hear from our senses.

Images and ideas pass through our imagination to our reasoning capabilities. It is through the medium of our imagination and moral intuition that we have the capacity to grasp what is real, beautiful, good and true.



## For Discussion Leaders: Inspiring the Moral Imagination through the Universal Appeal of Classic Films

The movies included here presuppose a moral universe where the human powers to know, love, and serve the good are at the center of each film's narrative. Different aspects of each film's artistry will appeal to each individual viewer in a unique way. Yet for all there is inspiration for the Moral Imagination. To meet the varied needs of each classroom or group session participant, we have included discussion handouts that feature (1) film history and background facts, (2) the film's artistry in direction, dialogue and performance, and (3) discussion points on the deep existential questions of love and life dramatized in the film. Exploring all these aspects of the art of classic cinema can result in an unforgettable group or classroom discussion.

Below is one example of the timeless struggle for the common good as illustrated in *High Noon*, the brilliant classic written by Carl Foreman and directed by Fred Zinnemann.

### *Social Beings or Autonomous Selves? - High Noon as a Case Study in the loss of community and civic friendship*



*Gary Cooper won the Oscar for the Best Actor of 1952 and the film was also nominated for Best Picture and Fred Zinnemann was nominated for Best Directed and Carl Foreman for Best Screenplay.*

*By any fair account, the film's greatness is rooted in the collaborative talents of the whole filmmaking team especially the symbiotic working relationship of Foreman and Zinnemann.*

# Exploring the Meaning of Justice and the Common Good in Three Westerns: *High Noon*, *Shane*, and *The Big Country*

Civics Lessons on Civic Virtue, Justice, and the Common Good for a Free Society

*The classical understanding of politics is that of free persons deliberating the question, how ought we to order our life together? The ought in that definition clearly signals that politics is in its nature, if not in practice, a moral enterprise.*

~Richard John Neuhaus

Westerns of the Golden Age give us a cinematic opportunity to explore the “classical understanding of politics” as *free persons deliberating on how they are to live together in political community*. This question is raised in Aristotle’s *Politics* and must be confronted by the people of every era in the public square of a free society. How, in times of harmony and times of crisis, are citizens to sustain *the tranquility of order* so many long for? Are enough of us willing to join in civic friendship and solidarity with others, *even across political divides*, in the cause of authentic justice? Can we transcend our comfort zones, tribal loyalties, and self-interests enough to affirm and defend the common good? What can be done if our social, moral, and cultural capital becomes depleted in our communities? In our day, conflicts and group hatred have replaced deliberation. The answers depend on whether enough citizens, like the characters in these films, must choose civic friendship over faction, embracing their common human nature with *both friends and enemies*. Here we explore these timeless questions on the elevated plane of dramatic art in *High Noon*, *Shane*, and *The Big Country*.



The vital civic project of maintaining a free society and a just political community depends on enough citizens placing authentic justice and the common good over self-interest, faction, personal ambition, cronyism, and tribalism.

# High Noon



The people in this community must confront - both personally and publicly - the question of choosing justice and the common good over self-interest, a false peace and moral indifference. The screenwriter, Carl Forman, makes it clear what he sees as the required moral direction. Marshal Will Kane is brilliantly portrayed by screen legend Gary Cooper. *High Noon* becomes a morality play that

confronts each of its viewers with timeless philosophical and political questions: *How would we act in a similar life and death situation in our own lives?*

## Storyline

Immediately after Marshal Will Kane and his wife Amy, are married, they learn that Frank Miller - the man Kane had sent to prison a few years back - has just been pardoned. He is headed to the town with his gang to confront Will Kane in a life and death showdown. At every turn, Kane's requests for help from his fellow citizens are of no avail. One by one he is turned down or betrayed by the men he thought were his friends, Kane realizes that he is alone in his defense of the common good of the town.

We see cynicism in the Judge, opportunism in the deputy, indifference from some of the townspeople, and political expediency from his best friend the Mayor. The most heartrending of all these losses in personal friendship is the estrangement he experiences with his wife, Amy. She is a Quaker and has witnessed the death of her father and her brother in the Civil War. It is Kane's former mistress, Helen, who persuades Amy to stand with her man in the final confrontation.



Film Facts: *High Noon*

**Year:** 1952

**Starring:** Gary Cooper, Grace Kelly, Katy Jurado, Lloyd Bridges, Thomas Mitchell

**Director:** Fred Zimmerman

**Screenwriter:** Carl Foreman

**Viewing Time:** 85 Minutes

**Academy Awards:**

Best Actor - Gary Cooper

Best Music

Best Film Editing

**Academy Award Nominations:**

Best Picture – Stanley Kramer

Best Director – Fred Zinneman

Best Writing, Screenplay – Carl Foreman

Screenwriter Carl Foreman and Director Fred Zinnemann used the simple device of a clock to symbolize the passage of time and increase the audience's tension. As the story progresses, the clocks get larger and closer to the camera. Zinnemann repeatedly used the stark image of train tracks stretching away from the viewer into the distance to convey approaching danger.



## Film Critics Corner



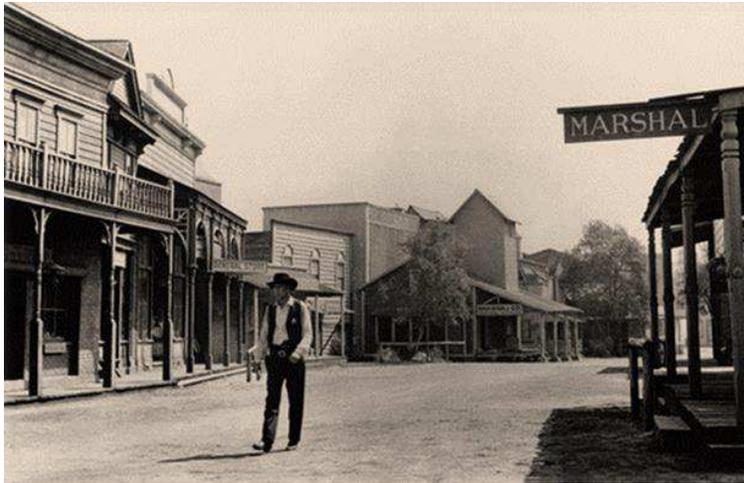
The westerns made before *High Noon*, were full of fast-paced action but short on high drama and depth in their depiction of character. Screenwriter Carl Foreman and Director Fred Zinneman created together this different kind of Western. They researched old civil war photographs to help them give

the film its stark and dramatic documentary quality. The story unfolds in a time frame that is virtually the same as the length of the movie itself. This technique adds to the suspense as the clocks shown throughout the film grow larger and larger in anticipation of the story's climax at "high noon." In real time the high drama of the Hollywood blacklist was unfolding and what happens in *High Noon* was portraying what happens in a community when the *meaning* of justice and common good is in great dispute.



## Friendship, Justice, and the Common Good in *High Noon*

*Timeless Philosophical Question: Are we social beings or autonomous selves?*



*Marshall Kane must confront a pervasive “culture of indifference overtaking his community. Because we live together as social beings and not just as autonomous individuals, we have a moral obligation to work with each other for the common good of our communities.*

High Noon: A case study in a western town as a moral community

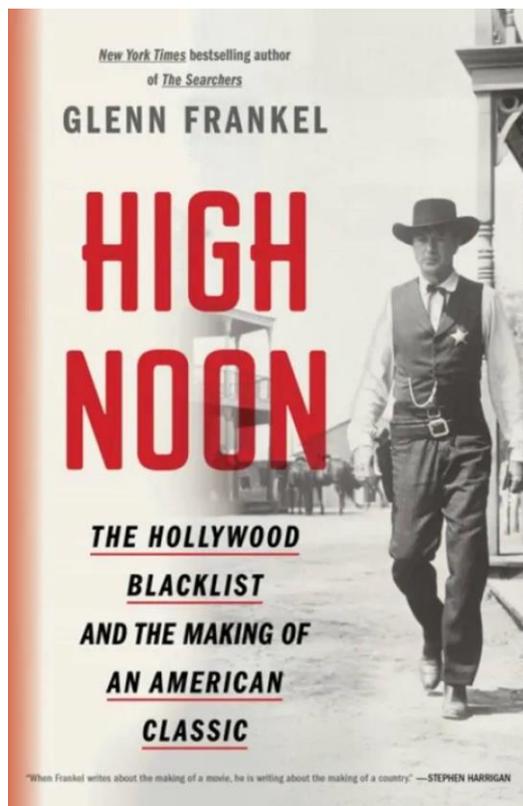
The common good is always right in front of us—with family, neighbors, town, state, country and the world. By growing in virtue, we are better able to act in a heroic way when we find ourselves in a situation that requires exceptional courage. But as history shows, something called “politics” can blind many of us to the higher claims of solidarity, justice and the common good.



Carl Foreman’s screen play gives an account of what happens when Marshall Kane engages with the citizens of Hadleyville when the outlaw gang Kane got rid of is coming back to town to kill him. The citizens of Hadleyville must confront their own interior moral compass and decide whether to face moral truth or ignore it. Everything is tested: friendship, loyalty, civic virtue, moral leadership and ultimately the life of a political community.

## Backstory : *High Noon* and the era of the Hollywood Blacklist

Both the film and the Hollywood era in which it was made give timeless lessons in *the nature of politics* in any community when a crisis arises. The perennial realities of faction and tribalism we should know from history and experience will be predictable given the realities of both the better side and the darker side of our human nature. Screenwriter Carl Foreman is at the center of Glenn Frankel's narrative on the making of *High Noon* and the Hollywood Blacklist.



Frankel gives a detailed account of the Hollywood blacklist era. The response of all the citizens and stakeholders in Hollywood to this crisis confirms that each of us carries within us the capacity to respond with honor and loyalty or cowardice and self-seeking over friendship. For example, the friendship and collaboration of *High Noon's* screenwriter Carl Foreman and its producer Stanley Kramer ended in the midst of the drama of the Hollywood blacklist. As Frankel relates, Foreman as a committed liberal forgave political conservative John Wayne for his public comments, but never spoke to his former collaborator and fellow liberal Stanley Kramer again.

### Gary Cooper's Commitment to the Common Good in the Midst of the Crisis

Glenn Frankel gives us an amazing account of how Gary Cooper walked the higher road of civic friendship, giving witness with leadership and integrity just as he does as Marshal Will Kane in the film. In any political crisis, and in particular in this era of the Hollywood blacklist, there will be totally opposing narratives concerning the heroes and villains. But all factions agree that Gary Cooper could recognize a fellow citizen over an existential threat to the nation.

Post-Viewing Discussion: *How Moral Choices Impact a Community in Crisis*

Discuss how each of the characters carry their own subjective view of moral reality. There is a lack of shared vision of what are the greatest goods that must be cared for and preserved.



Cowardice

Will Kane's deputy Sam Fuller forces his wife to tell Will he is not at home. He forces his wife to choose between the possibility of his own death and the call to stand with Marshall Kane. *Well, whaddya want? Do you want me to get killed? Do you want to be a widow, is that what you want?*

Bitterness

The retired Sheriff who hired Will is blind to the claims of honor. Giving in to self-pity, he falls into indifference and cynicism saying, *People gotta talk themselves into law and order before they do anything about it. Maybe because down deep they don't care. They just don't care.*



The Moral Expediency of the Mayor



Discuss how people respond to Kane in the church scene. Some are willing to fight, but back down when they do not gather support for their position. Few are *willing to pay the price of the justice that will save the town from the loss of its soul.* The mayor says it is a matter of the town's "reputation" and its future prosperity. Expediency is his moral focus.

Discuss how each of the characters has a distinct and subjective view of the nature of reality and moral responsibility.

### The Cynicism of the Judge

The Judge just shrugs his shoulders and comments that since the history of the world began, people will always be blind to the good. According to the judge,



*This is just a dirty little village in the middle of nowhere. Nothing that happens here is really important.*

### The Deputy's Opportunism and Ambition

Will Kane's deputy, Harvey, is an opportunist who sees the arrival of Miller's gang as his opportunity to get Kane's job.



Helen and Amy: Gaining Perspective to make a better moral choice

Hatred of violence has blinded Amy to her husband's real situation. It is Helen who gives Amy the moral insight to understand her moral responsibility to her husband.

## Reflections on Solidarity, and the Common Good in a Political Community

*High Noon* is a civics lesson in what can happen when – whether by ignorance, indifference, or deliberate choice – citizens devalue the common good of the community

*What is right and true is also eternal and does not begin or end written statutes.*  
~Cicero

*There is in nature a common principle of the just and unjust that all people in some way discern even if they have no association or commerce with each other.*  
~Aristotle

*Law is nothing other than a certain ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by the person who has the care of the community.*  
~Thomas Aquinas

*These three quotes reflect the classical view of civic virtue in the great tradition of political thought that began with the seminars of Socrates. The classical view of human nature, that we are social beings as opposed to autonomous selves, challenges us in all seasons to work in solidarity with other citizens for justice and the common good. In the great tradition, defending the common good is much more than just observing “the letter of the law.” When a political crisis arises, there is a call to each person in the community to take moral action in solidarity with each other. *High Noon*’s themes highlight this theme of accepting personal moral responsibility by members of any political community, big or small.*

### Gary Cooper as Marshall Will Kane Is the Person Who Has the Care of the Community

The dramatic events in *High Noon* show vividly the burden that Gary Cooper as Marshall Will Kane carries. He is clearly the person who *has the care of the community*. This truth is evident but most of the people in the town do not want to face it: they only come around once Marshall Kane with the help of his wife overcomes Miller and his gang.



## Shane



*Shane* always appears on any popular or film critic list as one of the greatest films of all time, and one of the greatest in the western genre. Whatever the shadows of Shane's past life have been, his motives and intentions in the events of the story are so clearly honorable and pure that the audience is always on his side. This is not just another Western about good guys verses bad guys. This is a drama that challenges the viewer to think about our common human nature, who we are as persons, and how we are connected to one another in community and civil society.

**Storyline** A mysterious gunfighter, Shane (Alan Ladd) rides into a small Wyoming farm and finds himself in the middle of a life and death struggle between the settlers and a ruthless cattle baron Rufus Ryker (Emile Meyer). Shane finds happiness with the Starrett family, Joe, (Van Heflin) his wife, Marian (Jean Arthur), and their son Joey (Brandon de Wilde).

The conflict deepens when Ryker decides that he will drive the settlers out of the valley. When Shane and Joe win the day in a pitched battle, Ryker decides to bring in a professional gun fighter Wilson (Jack Palance) to drive the settlers out.

Things come to a head at the 4<sup>th</sup> of July wedding anniversary celebration. At that time Joe Starrett begins to notice that Marian and Shane are attracted to one another. Tragedy strikes when Stonewall Torrey (Elisha Cook Jr.) foolishly tries to confront Wilson and is gunned down. At that point, Shane knows his mission is to use his skills as a gunfighter to overcome Wilson and defend the farmers against Ryker. Throughout the film the most memorable scenes are between Alan Ladd and Brandon De Wilde.



**Film Facts: *Shane***

**Year:** 1953

**Starring:** Alan Ladd, Jean Arthur, Van Heflin

**Director:** George Stevens

**Screenwriter:** A.B. Guthrie Jr. (screenplay), Jack Sher (additional dialogue),

**Viewing Time:** 118 Minutes

**Production Company:** Paramount Pictures Corporation

**Academy Award:**

- Best Cinematography, Color, Loyal Griggs

**Academy Award Nominations:**

- Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Brandon De Wilde
- Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Jack Palance
- Best Director, George Stevens
- Best Picture, George Stevens
- Best Writing, Screenplay, A.B. Guthrie Jr.

The Setting for the Story of *Shane*

The story is based on a real conflict that took place between ranchers and homesteaders in Johnson County, Wyoming in 1892. Director George Stevens created the town and the Starrett homestead where most of the action takes place. The Starrett homestead is surrounded by the Grand Teton Mountains near Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The director's encompassing idea of the community, town, and the majestic Grand Teton Mountains surrounding them is summed up in the scene of Torrey's funeral.



## Film Critic's Corner

Through the character of Joey director George Stevens pulls together the threads of the story into an artistic whole. We are seeing the whole story unfold through



Joey's eyes. Joey's role as observer is confirmed by Shane at the very beginning when he tells Joey:

*I like a man who watches things go on around. It means he'll make his mark someday.*

Throughout the film, Shane's character is presented as having a deep and mysterious interior life that we do not see. As Turner Classic Movies host Eddie Mueller has said, the great directors of the classic era were very skillful in allowing their audience to see exactly what the directors wanted them to see. Shane comes into the valley as a mystery and leaves the valley as a mystery. But what do we learn from Shane's life? We learn that in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, we must accept our situation and make the best moral choices given our situation.

Joey serves as the voice for the audience in the last scene when he calls out, *Shane, come back!* This scene was so compelling that it became for a season part of the culture itself.



## Images of the Struggle for Community and the Common Good in *Shane*

### The Spirit of Friendship

From the beginning, Shane shows his loyalty to the Starrett family by standing with Joe when Ryker and his gang come to harass them. Ryker asks Shane who he is to which Shane replies: *I'm a friend of Starrett's.*



### Leadership and Solidarity



Joe tries to keep the families from leaving after the funeral: *We can have a regular settlement here. We can have a town and churches and a school.* Joe begins to falter in making his appeal to the community. Shane speaks up to support him: *You know what he wants you to stay for? Something that means more to you than anything else - your families.*

Shane's words give Joe the strength to explain to his fellow settlers why they stay and build a community.

*We can't give up this valley. This is farming country, a place where people can come and bring up their families. Who is Ryker or anyone else to run us away from our own homes? He only wants to grow beef. What we want to grow up is families, to grow 'em good and strong, the way they was meant to be grown. God didn't make all this country just for one man like Ryker.*

Lewis sees his house burning in the distance. Joe tells Lewis that he will help rebuild his home and the other homesteaders stand behind him in solidarity. They all come to realize that each family is an essential part of a greater whole and that they possess a community that they can build up together.



## Post-Viewing Discussion:

### THE CIVIC VIRTUES THAT SUSTAIN COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

#### How the Spirit of Entitlement Can Damage a Community

Joe Starrett and Ryker have a conversation about justice and human rights. Ryker believes that he has the right to the land and the right to drive the settlers out. This false view of reality has taken over Ryker's mind and moral judgment. He rationalizes his actions by thinking the land belongs to him as a matter of justice. Because he once fought for this land, he thinks he can violate the rights of others who threaten his interests.

Discuss Ryker's Argument about why he feels he has a right to control the use of the land for his own self-interest:

Joe Starrett confronts Ryker saying,

*I'm not belittlin' what you and the others did. At the same time, you didn't find this country. There was trappers here and Indian traders long before you showed up and they tamed this country more than you did. You talk about rights. You think you've got the right to say that nobody else has got any.*

#### Inspiring solidarity in a fragile community

Discuss the arguments made by Joe Starret and Shane at Torey's funeral. Both men make a compelling case for staying in the community. Shane says,

*You know what he wants you to stay for? Something that means more to you than anything else - your families. Your wives and kids...They've got a right to stay here and grow up and be happy. That's up to you people to have nerve enough to not give it up.*



## THE CIVIC VIRTUES THAT SUSTAIN COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

Discuss the virtues we see in Shane's character. What do these virtues tell us about how our institutions of family and community can be rebuilt today?



### **Friendship**

From the beginning, Shane shows his loyalty as a friend to the Starrett family by standing with Joe when Ryker and his gang come to harass them. Ryker asks Shane who he is to which Shane says: *I'm a friend of Starrett's.*

### **Humility**

Even though up to now he was a gunfighter calling his own shots, he becomes Joe's hired hand and follows Joe's orders to stay out of trouble even at the risk of being called a coward: *I'm workin' for Starrett.*



Discuss the scenes that show how civic virtues support the common good of a community.

### ***Leadership and Solidarity***



Shane backs Joe in leadership with the homesteaders:

*You know what he wants you to stay for? Something that means more to you than anything else - your families.*

### ***Wisdom and Reason***

Shane knows that he could have probably stayed if he and Marion were not deeply attracted to each other. It is up to him to put things in their right order for her. When Marian asks,

*Are you doing this just for me?*

He answers, *For you, Marion - for Joe - and little Joe.*



### ***Responsibility***

Shane teaches Joey a great lesson in personal responsibility before he leaves:

*You go home to your mother and your father. And grow up to be strong and straight. And Joey, take care of them, both of them.*

## Reflections on Community and the Common Good in *Shane*

The character of Shane portrays the essential link between the conscience of every person as an individual and the critical defense of the common good in a community or a society.

Three elements associated with achievement of the common good are seen in the film's events. The first principle element in the common good is the growth of civic virtue in each person. The second element is the good of the larger community, the society as a whole. The third element is the peace and stability that must be actively defended and *maintained* if the community and individuals who live there are to flourish.



Shane discovers for the first time in his life the joy of being welcomed into a family and having close and loving relationships with people he can trust. He knows that they need to trust and depend on him.

Shane gains a sense of solidarity working with the Starrett family and the community of settlers, realizing that they are all in survival mode.

Shane is willing to risk his life for the good of the Starrett family and the other homesteaders.



for

## SOCIAL BEINGS VS. AUTONOMOUS SELVES



Shane enters the valley as an ex-gunfighter traveling to “one place or another, someplace I’ve never been.” He comes to love the Starrett family and in due time he joins Joe Starrett in articulating to the other settlers the reasons why they need to stay and fight to build their community. In the end, Shane sacrificially gives himself to protect the family he loves and to ensure the survival of the community.

A society can be torn apart if enough people start to believe that we are completely independent, autonomous selves who are free to define and act on our own definition of reality.



- The common good does not work against the good of the individual; rather, it is in harmony with it and promotes it.
- The common good is sustained only when a critical number of the citizens in a community each play their role in solidarity with each other for the greater good of the whole community.

# *The Big Country*

*The Big Country* is a story that embodies many of life's contradictions. Gregory Peck, co-producer with William Wyler, spoke in later years about the difficulties caused by overnight script changes during production. History is the best judge of the quality of any film and any difficulties with the script seem unnoticeable today. William Wyler had the ability to connect his characters intimately to the audience. His confidence as an artist and a director is reflected in a comment he made in 1947: *You have to have the passion to tell the story, and you have to know how to tell it with style.*

## Storyline

Gregory Peck, as Jim McKay, heads west to marry Pat Terrill (Carroll Baker), the daughter of wealthy rancher Major Terrill (Charles Bickford). The Major is embroiled in a feud with Rufus Hannassey (Burl Ives) over the rights to the "Big Muddy." Julie Maragon (Jean Simmons) had inherited the property from her grandfather, and she allows both clans full access to the water for their cattle. The Major's right-hand man Steve Leech (Charlton Heston) is jealous of Jim because he also loves Pat. Steve is constantly trying to engage Jim in a fight.



When Rufus challenges the Major at Jim and Pat's engagement party, Jim is made aware of the seriousness of the "Big Muddy" dispute. He is disturbed when the Major describes Rufus and his clan as "*nothing but animals.*" Deciding to explore the country on his own, Jim comes upon Julie Maragon at the Big Muddy. In the course of their visit he buys the precious land from her. He promises her that both clans will have access to the water. Soon Jim realizes that Pat shares her father's individualistic view about the land and that their engagement must end. Steve Leech in the meantime is beginning to see that the Major is using him to destroy Rufus. There is a "duel" between Jim and Buck which



results in Buck's death. Jim confronts Rufus with the truth that this is a "personal feud" that must not take any more lives. Rufus sees that Jim is right and engages in a final conflict with the Major, after which the common good and peace of the community is restored.

Film Facts: *The Big Country*

**Year:** 1958

**Starring:** Gregory Peck, Jean Simmons,  
Carroll Baker, Charlton Heston, Burl  
Ives, Charles Bickford

**Director:** William Wyler

**Screenwriters:** James R. Webb, Sy Bartlett,  
Robert Wyler

**Viewing Time:** 165 Minutes

**Academy Award:** Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Burl Ives



In his autobiography *In the Arena*, Charlton Heston describes his impression of William Wyler as a director: *Off the set, he was a warm and delightful man; we remained friends until his death, more than 20 years later. Shooting a film, he was very different. He was abstracted, digging inside himself for the scene until he got to the root of it, then giving it to the actors.*

While he was playing the character of Steve Leach in *The Big Country*, William Wyler decided that he wanted Heston to play the lead for *Ben-Hur*, a role that brought him the Oscar for Best Actor.

*Willy Wyler announced that I would play Judah Ben-Hur. Much later, he told me he decided that while we were still shooting Big Country, weeks before he finally agreed to direct the picture. That was very like him; he weighed his creative choices carefully and privately, consulting no one. Casting the role was the easier exercise; directing Ben-Hur would be a staggering task - physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting.*

## Film Critics Corner

### *The Big Country* in Film History

Director William Wyler, and star, Gregory Peck, having enjoyed a great success in their collaboration for *Roman Holiday* in 1953, decided that they would collaborate as co-producers several years later for *The Big Country*.

### The Brilliance of Motion Picture Art: Dialogue, Direction and Performance

The complex social nature of our human condition is seen in the intertwined lives of each character in this ensemble cast. The performance of Burl Ives as Rufus is original and brilliant, winning the folk singer turned actor the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in 1959. The final scenes are unforgettable: Rufus is vainly trying to maintain his crumbling world by conducting a



duel between his son Buck (an outstanding performance by Chuck Connors), and Peck's character, Jim McKay. Rufus has failed to set an example for Buck or give him guidance. He resorts to verbal put-downs and threats of violence to control Buck. When he is forced to shoot Buck to prevent him from killing Jim unfairly, the audience sympathizes with a man who must choose between justice and the life of his son, a man whose bad decisions have made such a choice inevitable.

Charlton Heston notes that the fight scene between himself and Gregory Peck was intended by William Wyler to convey the futility of violence that comes from the vice of pride we all observe in human nature. In his autobiography, Heston comments:



*We worked through it doggedly, blow by blow in the stifling August heat of the prairie for two endless days. At one point, Willy moved the camera up on a ridge two hundred yards away. I thought I must be hallucinating; I knew enough about lenses by then to see we'd be the size of ants on the screen. This was Willy's point, of course—the insignificance of two tiny figures struggling in the dust of this vast land. In the end, there was no winner.*

## Civic Friendship, Solidarity and the Common Good in *The Big Country*

The worldview of Major Terrill and his ruthless use of power, which he disguises as ‘law and order,’ are clear from the beginning of the film. Jim has a moral responsibility to challenge the Major’s beliefs and unjust actions. He explains to the



Major that his riding on the Hannasseys is not a matter of honor or of protection of the innocent; it is a matter of pure aggression. *Major, you’re riding on the Hannasseys for reasons of your own. Not because of anything that happened to me.*

At one point in the story Jim says to Pat, *I’m not going to go on living in the middle of a civil war.* With this comment, Gregory Peck’s character is speaking the truth that the audience knows as well; it is not possible to live a good life in a community plagued with constant conflict.



With his decision to buy the Big Muddy from Julie, Jim sees a way to find a place for himself in “The Big Country” and simultaneously serves the common good of the community.

He tells Julie that he will allow access to the water for all the neighbors, including the Hannasseys and the Terrills. Throughout the film Jim McKay resolutely avoids unnecessary conflicts, but when Julie is kidnapped, he knows he must take action. He risks his life in defying Major Terrill and riding past Terrill’s men into Blanco Canyon.

One enduring strength of *The Big Country* is its classical presentation of the human condition. The film reflects the common human experience: we live *simultaneously in three spheres of life – family, community, and society.*



## Post-Viewing Discussion: Civic Virtue and the Common Good in *The Big Country*

### Three Elements of the Common Good in Community and Society

*The Big Country* dramatizes the essential link between personal virtue practiced by individuals and the civic virtue required for the common good of a community in civil society. *Three elements* commonly associated with the care and defense of the common good are seen in the film's events. *The first element* is the formation of conscience and development of civic virtue in each person. The second element is the joining together of *enough individuals in the community who know they are essential*; citizens who work in solidarity and make sacrifices necessary for the sake of the common good. The third element is the strength, resolve, and determination of citizens to maintain the common good over time. This third element is a challenge for citizens in any community; it *requires the practice of civic virtue in daily life beyond crisis mode*.



The second element is the joining together of *enough individuals in the community who know they are essential*; citizens who work in solidarity and make sacrifices necessary for the sake of the common good. The third element is the strength, resolve, and determination of citizens to maintain the common good over time. This third element is a challenge for citizens in any community; it *requires the practice of civic virtue in daily life beyond crisis mode*.

### The First Element: Formation of conscience and civic virtue in each and every person

Discuss and contrast the characters of Jim McKay and Steve Leech.

Steve Leech and the other men have blindly followed the Major's orders, but with the courageous act of Jim McKay, opposing the Major and entering Blanco Canyon to rescue Julie, Steve sees the Major's true character and finally stands up to him.



*There's not much you could ask that I wouldn't try to do... I just don't hold with you on this. I just can't do it, Major. I can't."*  
*"you call me whatever you want but I'm not beatin' up any more men for you..."*

Steve's example in turn affects the rest of the men, and they see the Major in a new light. When Steve and the men follow the Major, they are intending to protect him, not perform acts of violence. Wyler conveys this distinction; the men do not support his decision. Terrill has lost both the authority over and respect of Steve and his men.

## Post-Viewing Discussion (Continued)

First Element: Formation of conscience and civic virtue in each, and every person



Jim McKay and Steve Leech

The worldview of Major Terrill and his ruthless use of power, which he disguises as ‘law and order,’ are clear from the beginning of the film. Jim accepts the moral responsibility to challenge the Major’s beliefs and unjust actions.

Early in the film Jim explains to the Major that his riding on the Hannasseys is not a matter of honor or of protection of the innocent; it is a matter of pure aggression. *Major, you’re riding on the Hannasseys for reasons of your own. Not because of anything that happened to me.* At one point



in the story Jim says to Pat, *I’m not going to go on living in the middle of a civil war.* With this comment, Gregory Peck’s character is speaking the truth that the audience knows as well; it is not possible to live a good life in a community plagued with constant conflict.



Pat Terrill and Julie Maragon

Compare the character qualities of Pat and Julie.

How do these two women differ in their awareness of, and willingness to serve, the common good?

## Post-Viewing Discussion (Continued)

The Second Element – The gathering of enough individuals in the community committed to sacrificing for the sake of the common good.

Discuss and contrast the character qualities of Major Terrill and Rufus Hannassey.



When an appeal to the common good is made to them, how does each man respond?

In the climactic final scenes, Major Terrill and Rufus Hannassey are

both ultimately held morally accountable for their actions. Throughout the film, Major Terrill uses his prestige as a retired military officer in the Civil War, and his position as a wealthy landowner, to take advantage of the absence of law enforcement. He makes his own law.

Rufus Hannassey sees through the Major and challenges him in a high point of the film. Unfortunately, Hannassey cannot see in his own character what he sees so clearly in the Major.

The case of Rufus Hannassey is more tragic than the Major's. Once Buck dies, Rufus takes to heart the truths that Jim McKay has spoken: the violence that has taken lives and destroyed the peace is nothing more meaningful than a "*personal feud between two selfish, ruthless, vicious old men.*" Rufus sees that what Jim has said is true and he goes to confront Major Terrill in a last fight.



## Post-Viewing Discussion (Continued)

The Third Element - The strength and determination of ordinary citizens to work for the common good must be maintained in a free society.



When Julie Maragon's grandfather owned the Big Muddy, both the Terrill and the Hannassey clans had access to all the water they needed for their cattle. The film's events make clear that Julie's grandfather had not only ownership of the Big Muddy,

but the *moral authority* to maintain the peace between the two factions.

Jim McKay resolves to buy the Big Muddy from Julie, not only to work it for himself, but also to work for the common good of the community.

Major Terrill and Rufus Hannassey, each in their own way, disrupt the good efforts of Jim and Julie to bring peace and order to the community. Clearly the task of defending and maintaining the common good must *continue on after the deaths of these two men.*



Scenes in *The Big Country* give evidence that even if events bring peace for a time, enough engaged citizens *must continue the struggle to maintain the common good over time and in every season.*

## Reflections on Civic Virtue & Care for the Common Good in *The Big Country*

What is right and true is also eternal and does not begin or end written statutes.  
~Cicero

Law is nothing other than a certain ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by the person who has the care of the community.  
~Thomas Aquinas



*The Big Country* portrays the essential link between personal virtue practiced by individuals and the civic virtue required for the common good of a community in civil society. Fundamental elements associated with achievement of the common good are seen in the film's events. Gregory Peck's character Jim McKay takes on the critical role of *the person who has the care of the community*.

People with deeply diverse opinions must come together for the sake of the common good.

In *The Big Country* we see two major characters, Major Terrill and Rufus Hannassey, who are forced to confront the disconnect between the public good they claim to support and the private self-interest they are determined to protect. The two characters, brilliantly played by Charles Bickford and Burl Ives, fail to rise above their own self-interest and ambitions.

On the other hand, the dynamics in the relationship between Gregory Peck's Jim McKay and Charlton Heston's Steve Leech dramatizes an essential element for preserving the common good in the public square. Heston's character *must face up to the reality that his mentor, Major*



*Terrill, is using his power for evil purposes.* As the story reaches its climax, Steve Leech now shares with Jim McKay the same understanding of the common good.

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