

Night of the Hunter

Major Actors: Harry Powell: Robert Mitchum

Rachel Cooper: Lillian Gish

John Harper: Billy Chapin

Pearl Harper: Sally Jane Bruce

Director: Charles Laughton

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### Foretelling through Symbols

“It’s a hard world for little things,” symbolizes the theme of the film *The Night of the Hunter*. John (Billy Chapin) and Pearl (Sally Jane Bruce), two innocent kids whose father has been arrested for stealing money, are forced to keep the biggest secret. That secret is where this money is hidden. For these two youngsters, keeping this secret is tough. The money is held in Pearl’s doll that she carries around everywhere. The town’s preacher, Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum), has married and killed the children’s mother and now only has one desire, to find out from John and Pearl where all of the money is hidden. *The Night of the Hunter* is a story of two innocent, orphaned kids who are being chased by a fanatical man. Although some of Sally Jane Bruce’s (Pearl Harper’s) acting is unrealistic and appears contrived, Charles Laughton effectively adds suspense through his foreshadowing by using shadows and lighting, LOVE and HATE tattoo, and music which all efficiently foreshadow the outcome of the subsequent scene.

In *The Night of the Hunter*, the shadows and lighting add suspense to the scene and symbolize what is about to come. One reoccurring use of shadows in the film is the shadow that appears most every time before Harry Powell, the unwavering preacher, enters the scene. This shadow is used to indicate something bad is about to happen. In one scene Pearl takes all of the hidden money and begins to play with it and make paper dolls using the money. As the scene continues you begin to see a shadow of the preacher coming towards to door. This shadow adds

suspense for the viewers because they wait in awe to discover what will happen when the preacher catches the kids with the money.

The use of shadows allows the viewers to realize what is happening before the characters in the scene know. Viewers know that Harry is coming, and this adds suspense as they wait for the characters to discover that he is coming. Towards the end of the film this use of shadows is drawn on again in Mrs. Cooper's (Lillian Gish) house. Mrs. Cooper becomes the caretaker of John and Pearl during the film. All of a sudden you begin to see a shadow of the man appear in the house, this is another scene that adds to the suspense of the film and gives the viewer insight about what will happen next. It suggests a forthcoming event. The lighting of the scene also foreshadows about the film. During the scene before the killing of John and Pearl's mother, the mother lies in a bed with her hands crossed over her chest like the way a deceased person lays in their coffin. You can see a faint outlining of light around her body. This outline is in the shape of a coffin and it is an indicator of what is soon going to become of John and Pearl's mother. During a very suspenseful scene, Harry is waiting outside Mrs. Cooper's house waiting for the children to come to him when Ruby, one of Mrs. Cooper's children, came into the shot holding a candle. The candle blinded the audience and Mrs. Cooper of what was going on outside and when the candle was blown out the preacher was gone. This causes fear for the viewers as they wait with anticipation of where Harry Powell might be. This use of lighting and shadows is effective in foreshadowing events ahead.

Harry's hands become significant because they are a prominent symbol that shows whether the preacher has hate or love towards the situation he is in. Harry Powell has tattoos of the words HATE and LOVE going across his knuckles on his hands. One word is on each hand and they both represent bigger ideas in the film. Harry uses his love hand when he is committing

acts of violence or is holding the money, or close to reaching his goal. Harry uses his hate hand when is showing false affection towards the kids, the children's mother, and doesn't like the situation he is in other situations he is put in. Pearl's doll holds all of the money that is left by the children's father, whenever Harry is holding the doll he is doing so with the hand that has love tattooed on the knuckles. This symbolizes his love for money and shows his passion for obtaining this fortune. Though the love hand shows his love of violence, he also uses this hand as a sign of peace to people as he tries to earn their trust in order to take advantage of them. When he tells the story of why these words are tattooed on his hand he tells the townspeople a bible story that has to do with love and hate. In the end of the story he says, "Love wins". This is part of his plan to gain the trust of the townspeople, he is trying to appear like a loving man, but he is really only a wolf in sheep's clothing. Another instance where this hand is used as a sign of peace is when he arrives at Mrs. Cooper's house inquiring about two children; those children were John and Pearl. He wanted Mrs. Cooper to like him so she released the children to him. In order to gain her trust he clearly held his love hand towards her to show her the "love" he was giving to her.

The hate hand is used to show false affection for people and situations. This hand is significant because it shows the viewers how the main character is feeling in the situation he is in, without blatantly saying it. Whenever the preacher is holding Pearl he is always doing so with his hate hand. He also talks to the townspeople about "Willa's runaway" with his hate hand clearly in view. Willa's (the children's mother) runaway was a lie to cover the murder that Harry had committed of Willa. This shows the audience his false affection towards Willa and demonstrates how he doesn't care about her absence. In one scene, John slams the door on Harry's hand. This is the hate hand and this symbolizes how John doesn't like the hate that Harry

Powell is showing towards them and he is “slamming the door on hate and locking it out”. The significance of the tattoos is to show the true feelings of the main character and to allow the audience to predict the outcome of the situation.

The director uses Harry’s hymns and Mrs. Cooper’s lullabies to foreshadow the good and bad events that are following. Harry is constantly singing a song throughout the movie. This hymn has lyrics that say, “Leaning, Leaning, safe and secure from all alarms”. This song shows the irony of the scene because Harry Powell does not demonstrate being safe and secure. He in fact demonstrates the opposite. Whenever this hymn is played in his deep, soothing voice you know that Harry is near and that a bad event is soon to appear. His singing is similar to what you would hear in a nightmare or an evil and dark situation. Mrs. Cooper is represents something different with her singing. Her singing is more dream-like and is like a lullaby. Her songs are about the bible stories and those stories are what the children hear before bed every night. When you hear Mrs. Cooper singing it represents a happier scene in the film.

The unrealistic acting of Sally Jane Bruce who plays Pearl Harper in the film hijacks the eerie and daunting mood of the film and alters the mood of the scene. One example of the acting that takes away from the atmosphere of the film is when John and Pearl are on the river in a boat and Pearl begins to sing. This is an unrealistic scene because Pearl’s voice sounds like she is an adult and doesn’t effectively demonstrate how Pearls voice should sound. This is a scene that distracts the viewers from the suspenseful and eerie mood of the film. Another instance where Pearls actions are unrealistic is when her and John and running up the stairs away from Harry Powell. She runs so slowly and leisurely it doesn’t seem normal for a person to be running that slow when a wild man is coming to kill them. The way that Pearl acts in some scene of the film

distracts the viewers and seizes the mood that the other scenes of the film have created for the viewers.

These symbols are a method used by Charles Laughton that creates a suspenseful mood for the viewers. They foreshadow forthcoming events and sometimes reveal things about characters and situations that are not blatantly stated within the plot of the film. These symbols show that things aren't always what they seem. That concept is true in life. There are wolves in sheep's clothing, like Harry Powell, in every town and they cannot fool you. People may portray symbols that suggest characteristics they have in life. The Night of the Hunter's symbols reveal a moral which is about how people aren't always what they appear and sometimes the way they act can suggest that. With these symbols added to the plot, it creates a scary and suspenseful mood, which enhances the enjoyment of the viewers and suggests the outcome of scenes that are coming.