

Shane Film Summary

Shane by George Stevens

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Context

Shane is indisputably one of the great classic films of the American West. Based on the novel written by Jack Schaefer in 1949, *Shane* brought the best of the book to life on the big screen. Shane is a wandering stranger who appears from out of nowhere and makes a profound impact on the lives of some simple homesteaders, the Starretts. Most of the story is told from the point of view of Joey, the young, impressionable son of Joe and Marian Starrett.

After reviewing original production projections, Paramount almost dropped *Shane* from distribution. They considered selling the film to another company because they did not believe it would earn enough money to cover its cost. However, *Shane* ended up finding success at the box office, grossing far more than expected.

George Stevens is widely regarded as one of the best directors of his time. Stevens made a variety of movies in addition to *Shane*, including many other powerful films about America and American ways of life. In fact, Stevens deliberately set out to direct and produce an "American Trilogy" of films, one of which was *Shane*. *A Place in the Sun* (1951) was the first film in his trilogy, followed by *Shane* (1953) and *Giant* (1956).

Originally, Stevens intended to cast Montgomery Clift as Shane and William Holden as Joe Starrett. However, both actors decided to accept roles in other films, so Stevens was forced to find replacements. From the list of actors under contract with Paramount, Stevens cast Alan Ladd, Van Heflin, and Jean Arthur (for the part of Marian Starrett) within three minutes. Considering the success of the movie, it seems that Stevens made wise casting decisions.

Alan Ladd had already become a popular actor before taking on his famous role as Shane. He had played leading roles in many other films, including *Appointment with Danger*, *Red Mountain*, *Botany Bay*, and *Desert Legion*. However, for the remainder of his life, Ladd would remain best known for playing the title role in *Shane*. Van Heflin had already attained recognition for parts in films such as *Possessed*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Madame Bovary*, and *My Son John*. *Shane* marked Jean Arthur's final film appearance. Her first major film was *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, with Frank Capra directing. Throughout her career, she had starred in many other films, including *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *The More the Merrier*, and *The Song of Bernadette*.

Shane received Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor (the young Brandon de Wilde), Best Supporting Actor (Jack Palance), Best Director, and Best Screenplay (A. B. Guthrie, Jr.). The film won its sole Oscar in the category of Best Cinematography, Color (Loyal Griggs). In 1985, director Clint Eastwood paid homage to this great film with his movie *Pale Rider*, which follows a similar storyline.



Summary and Analysis

The film begins with a shot of Shane riding across the countryside on his horse. We then watch a young boy, Joey Starrett, take aim at a deer just before it runs off, startled by Shane's horse. Joey runs to tell his father, Joe Starrett, that a man is coming; Joe responds, "Well, let him come." Shane rides up, and the family stops to watch him. Joe and Shane talk, then Shane talks to Joey about his habit of watching people.

Joe offers Shane some water, but Shane is spooked when he hears Joey cock his gun. Joey's mother, Marian, reprimands Joey for pointing a gun at Shane. Joey explains that he just wanted Shane to see his rifle, and Shane admits that he can "shoot a little." They hear horses galloping in the distance, and Joe suddenly pulls his rifle on Shane because he thinks that Shane may be in with the gang that has been troubling them. Joe is eventually convinced to put down his rifle, and Shane begins to ride off. However, Ryker's gang arrives and surrounds Joe and his house.

In an attempt to get all the land they need to raise their cattle, the gang members try to intimidate Joe. Shane walks up behind Joe and uses his imposing presence to threaten the gang. Joe finally succeeds in ordering them off his land claim, then stops Shane from leaving and thanks him for his help. Joe introduces Shane to his family and then invites him inside. Shane simply says, "You can call me Shane." The men wash up and go in to enjoy Marian's delicious dinner.

As they eat, a cow escapes from a breach in the fence, so Joey has to go address the situation. The men talk, and Shane vaguely explains that is traveling, on his way to a new place. Joe tells his family and Shane that Ryker will only succeed in driving him off his land by carrying him out in a pine box. Joe tells Shane that he needs to hire a man so that he will be able to get all the work done on the homestead. At this point, everyone notices that Marian has pulled out the nice dishes in honor of Shane.

Shane goes outside. Joey fears he is leaving, but Joe reassures him that Shane would never leave without his gun. In order to repay them, Shane begins chopping wood. Shane ends up working with Joe to remove an old tree stump from the land, and they finally pull it out; Joe has been fighting the stump for the past two years.

Joey wakes up the next morning to find a deer outside, and he begins to track it with his gun. He then visits with Shane, who is sleeping in the barn. Shane plans to leave after breakfast, but Joey asks him to stay and tells him that everyone else wants him to stay too. After agreeing to remain with the family, Shane goes into town while everyone else stays home. Joey asks his father why Shane did not wear his gun today, and Joe explains that he does not need it now.

Ernie Wright shows up at Joe's place and tells Joe that the Ryker brothers have raided his wheat and that he has decided to pull up his stakes and move on. Wright tells Joe not to try to talk him out of it; however, he finally he agrees to attend a meeting about the problem, but only if they actually do something about it afterward.



In town, Shane stops in a store to buy a few things for the family. Shane admits to the people in the store that he is surprised by the cost of clothes, since it has been some time since he bought some. Shane then goes to the bar for a drink, but people start to make rude comments about the stench of pigs on Shane. The men decide to kick Shane out of the bar, and one of them throws alcohol on him. Shane tells him that he is working for Joe Starrett. In response, the man threatens Shane, telling him that he and his soda pop should get out and stay, and warning him not to come back.

At Joe's house, everyone gets together for a meeting to discuss Ryker and his gang. Joe informs everyone that he has absolutely no intention of leaving the range. Joe introduces Shane to the group, and the men discuss Ryker's tactics. Then the men bring up Shane's encounter with Ryker's men in the bar; they are upset that Shane did not fight them. Shane walks out alone so that the other men will feel they can talk openly. Marian reassures Joey, who has been listening in, that Shane will not be leaving them. However, she tells Joey not to get to liking Shane too much since "he'll be moving on one day." In the end, all the men agree to go together once a month to buy their supplies so that they will have strength in numbers.

One day, everyone decides to go into town together, and they all meet at the Starrett's house beforehand. Joe tells Shane that someday he will find a woman worth waiting for, just like Joe found Marian. As the group heads toward town, Ryker's gang is also gathering there. Everyone enters the store to buy goods, but Shane goes next door to keep an eye on the men in the saloon. However, the men want Shane to leave. Shane offers to buy a man a drink, but when the man becomes rude, Shane hits him. They get into a fight, and Shane finally wins as little Joey watches and eats candy.

After the fight, Ryker offers Shane a job with his gang. Shane refuses the job and becomes offended when Ryker makes an off-color comment about Marian. Ryker tells Shane that he is going to ride him out of the valley. Joey says he wants to help Shane, so Shane tells him that the best thing he can do is to go away. Shane then begins fighting all of Ryker's men. After Joey tells everyone what is going on in the saloon, Joe rushes to Shane's assistance. Together, they beat up all Ryker's men and leave with the other families after promising to pay for everything they have broken.

Ryker tells his men that he is "through fooling" and that the air will be filled with gun smoke the next time he fights them. Marian praises both Joe and Shane for their heroism as she fixes them up, and Joey tells them that he bets they could "lick anyone." Before he goes to sleep, Joey calls Marian into his room and tells her, "Mother, I just love Shane!" She replies, "I like him too." When she comes out, Shane has left the room, and then Joe comes in; she asks him to hold her.

In the next shot, a man enters the saloon and meets with the owner. The next scene shows the Wright's house, where Ernie and his family are packing up for departure after discovering that their sow has been killed. The camera then moves to the Starrett ranch, where Shane is teaching Joey how to shoot. Joey asks Shane to shoot, and he is very impressed by his aim. Marian, who has been watching, asks Shane not to show Joey how to shoot. Marian tells Shane that everyone would be better off if there were no guns



in the valley. In the saloon, Ryker and his men discuss how to get rid of the homesteaders. Outside, men ride up and down the street, shooting off their guns to celebrate Independence Day. A man comes in and warns Ryker and his men that he cannot be scared off his claim any more than Joe Starrett can be.

The Starretts and the other homesteaders throw a festive party celebrating the holiday; the event also serves as an anniversary party for Joe and Marian. Joe announces that he is celebrating the fact that he gave up his independence ten years ago that day, and that he would never trade places with any other man in the world. Joe and Marian embrace, and Shane looks a bit sad as he watches. Shane and Marian begin dancing a few minutes later, and Joe appears a bit disturbed by the connection the two seem to have.

As one of the men gets ready to leave the party, he begins describing the stranger who appeared in the saloon earlier that day. Shane guesses that the stranger is a man named Wilson, and he warns everyone to be careful around him. Later that night, Ryker comes to visit Joe. He makes Joe a good offer, but refuses to extend it to the other homesteaders. Joe says no to Ryker, and Ryker leaves after telling Joe to watch out.

In town, Wilson and a man named Stonewall have a dispute when Wilson begins insulting many famous Confederate soldiers. Stonewall decides not to tolerate Wilson's remarks, but as soon as he pulls his gun, Wilson kills him. Another homesteader takes Stonewall's body; as he does so, he is warned that the gang will be waiting for anyone else who comes into town looking for trouble. As Shane and Joe relax by the water with their horses and discuss the future of the farm, the homesteader rides up with Stonewall. Marian is scared, and Joe decides to go into town. She begs Joe not to go alone, but the homesteader tells her that everyone else is leaving too. Although everyone plans on leaving, they make sure Stonewall receives a proper burial first.

After the funeral, the homesteaders leave their ranches, and Joe tries to convince everyone to stay at the Starrett house. Joe ineffectively tries to convince them of reasons to remain on their land, but Shane finally delivers a speech exhorting them to stay for the sake of their children. Joe tells them that growing families is more important than Ryker's goal of growing cattle. In the distance, they see a fire burning down Lewis's home. Joe tells everyone that they can save and rebuild the place if they work together. Lewis is touched that his fellow homesteaders would agree to do this for him. They hurry to extinguish the fire consuming the house. Ryker witnesses this and expresses anger that Starrett keeps uniting the group of homesteaders. Joe states that he has decided to have it out with Ryker even if he has to kill him. Marian begs him to put that thought out of his mind.

Ryker discusses with his men how to get rid of Joe, saying that he hopes to lure Joe to the saloon, where he can kill him. In the meantime, Joe decides to leave the house to fight Ryker, but Marian pleads for him not to go. Marian requests Shane's help in convincing Joe to wait, but Shane refuses to tell Joe what to do. Ryker's men show up at the Starrett house looking for Joe, and they inform Joe that Ryker wants to see him.



Joe agrees to meet Ryker even though he knows he might be killed. One of the men tells Shane that Joe's "up against a stacked deck."

Marian again implores Joe not to leave, but he explains that he must go because he does not want her or Joey to think he lacks bravery. He tells her that at least she would be taken care of by Shane if something were to happen to him now. Joey walks in a moment later and tells Joe and Marian that Shane is coming and is wearing his gun. Shane tells Joe that he will not be able to beat Wilson, whereas Shane knows that he himself at least has a chance of doing so. Marian tells Joe that she is ready to leave the homestead if that will save their lives. Shane refuses to let Joe go to the saloon, but Joe decides to fight Shane so that he can leave and protect his family. Shane finally defeats Joe in combat, striking him with his gun in the process, and heads into town to face Ryker. However, even though Shane hit Joe in an attempt to save him, Joey is upset and tells Shane that he hates him now.

Shane tells Marian that Joe will be all right, then heads for the bar. Marian stops Shane, reminding him that said he was through with gun fighting. She asks if he is doing this just for her, but he replies that he is doing it for the whole family. He reassures her that they might see him again someday. Marian says, "Shane, please, take care of yourself." He departs, and Marian returns to tending Joe. She explains to Joey that Shane simply had to do what he needed to do and tells him that he does not really hate Shane. Joey calls out to tell Shane he is sorry, but Shane is riding away and cannot hear him.

At the saloon, Shane meets Ryker, Wilson, and the rest of the gang. Although they are really waiting for Joe, they are not completely surprised when Shane shows up. Joey, who has followed Shane to the saloon, hides out, watching the action. Ryker tells Shane that he does not have a problem with him, but Shane tells him that both of their days are over. Wilson, who is sitting quietly in the corner, warns Shane not to push too far. Shane tells Wilson he has heard that he is "a low-down Yankee liar." Shane and Wilson start shooting, but in the end, Shane is the one left standing. He puts his gun back into his holster and walks out as Joey continues watching from his hiding place. Suddenly, Joey realizes that another man is about to shoot Shane. Joey calls out in warning, saving Shane's life. Afterward, Joey tells him, "I knew you were good, Shane. I knew it."

Shane tells Joey that the time has come for him to move on. Shane admits that he has to be who he is, and he is not a farmer. Joey tells him, "We want you back, Shane." In response, Shane asks Joey to go home and tell his mother that everything is all right. Shane says, "I'm okay, Joey. You go home to your mother and father and grow up to be strong, straight. And, Joey, take care of them - both of them." Joey agrees and runs toward home as Shane rides off in the other direction. As Shane disappears, Joey yells, "We want you, Shane. Mother wants you. I know she does! Shane, come back!"



Characters

Shane, played by Alan Ladd

Description

Shane is the classic good cowboy of the Western genre. Although he was a gunslinger in the past, Shane has finally found a way to do right by mankind. Shane is simply passing through the country when he happens upon the Starrett's homestead. Although Joe is skeptical at first, Shane shows his worth by helping Joe stand up to Ryker's gang.

Shane continues to prove himself as he assists the rest of the homesteaders. By standing up for them and coming to their aid, Shane helps Joe convince the homesteaders to unite and remain on their land for the sake of all their families. Finally, Shane has to leave because of the fight in the bar, but he has made a lasting imprint on the lives of the homesteaders, especially Joe, Marian, and Joey.

Analysis

Shane has all the typical characteristics of the classic gunslinger turned good guy. We know that Shane has been a gunslinger in the past, but his commitment to not carrying his gun with him unless it is seriously needed shows the viewer that he has definitely changed. Shane cares about the Starrett family and decides to stay with them to help protect them from Ryker's gang.

Everything seems to be going well in Shane's new life until Wilson kills Stonewall, compelling Shane to confront Ryker's gang in town. Shane reverts to his old way of life as he leaves the Starrett homestead, gun in hand. In order to save Joe's life and protect Joey and Marian from losing a father and a husband, Shane is forced to fight Joe; afterward, he must fight Wilson and the Ryker gang. As much as Shane dreads the event, he sacrifices himself and his good name to protect the Starretts. After the fight, Shane decides to leave town, realizing that his reputation will likely change for the worse despite his good reasons for fighting.

Joe Starrett, played by Van Heflin

Description

Joe Starrett is a noble homesteader committed to his family and his land claim. Joe tries to do the best for his family by working hard to keep the farm going and trying to stave off Ryker's gang. Joe's primary problem is the fact that his fellow homesteaders are scared and want to leave. However, he realizes that if the Ryker gang manages to intimidate the others into leaving, he and his family will probably have to leave as well.



Once Shane comes into the picture, Joe realizes that he will be able to stay on his land as long as Shane is there to back him up. At the party, we see that Joe notices the chemistry between Shane and Marian, but he trusts them both and realizes that he needs Shane. In the end, Joe and Shane work together to persuade the rest of the homesteaders to stay on their land.

Analysis

Joe is a leader, a man that the other homesteaders consistently look up to. He is brave, and he refuses to leave in the face of Ryker's threats. Despite constant harassment from the gang, Joe has remained on his claim, and he plans to stay there so that he can give Joey a better life with education and socialization.

Although Joe notices some sparks flying between Shane and Marian, he demonstrates his worth by not saying or doing anything to harm his family. Joe realizes that their attraction, along with the Ryker conflict, will eventually blow over, and he wants to have the respect of his son and wife when it does. Joe's character and work ethic cement the unity between the homesteading families, and with Shane's help, Joe manages to convince them all to stay on their land.

Marian Starrett, played by Jean Arthur

Description

Marian Starrett is a strong, brave woman seeking a wholesome life on her homestead with her husband and son. Marian is present when Shane first arrives, and it is evident that she finds him intriguing. Although she apparently has high regard for Shane, Marian never expresses her emotions, but only asks him at one point if she will ever see him again.

Analysis

Despite Marian's strong feelings, she holds true to her character as the strong, courageous, selfless woman on the range. Rather than becoming involved with Shane, she simply shares a few significant looks with him. Marian is far too pure of a woman to ever commit adultery or harm her husband and son. She remains entirely loyal to her family to the end, even when she knows that Shane will not be able to return to her after he fights in town.



Joey Starrett, played by Brandon de Wilde

Description

Joey Starrett is the young son of Joe and Marian. Joey wants to be just like his father until Shane arrives on the scene. After meeting Shane, Joey decides he wants to be strong and brave like him. Through most of the film, he adores Shane to the point of near worship, and he is the only one on Shane's side who witnesses the fight at the bar.

Analysis

Joey helps audiences see the good side of Shane. Because Joey worships Shane, everything presented through his eyes makes Shane look like a hero. Joey even admits at one point that he loves Shane almost as much as his own father. Joey's presence at the final fight in the saloon lets the viewer see what happens there and also allows for the final discussion between Joey and Shane. Joey does not want Shane to leave, but he tries to be brave and understanding when Shane explains that he simply cannot change his lifestyle. By pulling out his gun in the bar brawl, Shane has changed the way people in town will regard him from this point forward; they will consider him a gunslinger.

Rufus Ryker, played by Emile Myer

Description

Ryker is the primary bad guy in *Shane*. Ryker is a wealthy cattle owner who wants to take over everyone's land so he can use it to raise more cattle. Ryker employs a gang of tough guys to intimidate the homesteaders and scare them into abandoning their land. Eventually, he even calls in a man named Wilson to kill Joe and Shane, whose presence is making it difficult for Ryker to achieve his goals.

Analysis

Ryker serves little purpose other than being the villain who serves as a foil to the other characters and helps move along the story. Ryker's character is the exact opposite of Joe's: Ryker wants to steal from innocent people, while Joe wants to be sure that his family and the other families are cared for. Shane eventually faces off with Ryker, and even though Shane is considered a gunslinger, he is an infinitely better person than Ryker, who would steal and even kill for more land. In contrast, Shane chooses to fight only to protect others.



Themes

Good Guys Win in the End

Although Ryker tries to push all the homesteaders out of the valley, he ultimately fails, thanks to Shane's intervention. Shane has a rough past as a gunslinger. Although viewers are never given his entire story, they are made to understand that gunslingers have a bad reputation. Since he was once a gunslinger, Shane essentially has to prove his goodness to the Starretts and the other homesteaders. However, his commitment to the Starretts and the other settlers eventually establishes his character and worth.

Through the examples of Shane and Joe, we see that, at least in most Westerns, the good guys always win. With Shane's help, Joe is able to convince the homesteaders to stay and protect their land and each other. Joe wants the homesteading families' children to have schools and a strong community, and he does what he can to convince them that this is an important goal. Shane fights Wilson and Ryker to protect the homesteaders and allow them to pursue their dream of building a community. It becomes clear in the end that, even if Shane may not always have been a good man, he certainly played the part well while helping the good guys win against Ryker and his gang.

You Can't Escape the Past

Shane is a mysterious stranger whose past, present, and even future remain basically unknown to the viewer. Although the film quickly establishes that he was a gunslinger in the past, Shane stops carrying his gun with him on a regular basis. Joey wants to hear all about Shane's past, but Shane tries to protect Joey from the truth. Significantly, Shane refuses to teach Joey how to shoot until late in the film. The audience is given a sense that Shane is not only trying to help the Starrett family, but also trying desperately to escape his past.

In the end, however, we learn that it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to entirely escape one's past. After the final fight in the saloon, Joey chases Shane and begs him to return to the Starrett's homestead. Shane sadly refuses, saying, "Joey, there's no living with - with a killing. There's no going back from it. Right or wrong, it's a brand, a brand that sticks. There's no going back." Shane knows that, this time, he will be unable to escape what he has done. Even though he was trying to protect the Starretts and the other homesteaders, he recognizes that committing a murder will probably tarnish his name, even among those who have come to respect and trust him.

Grey Line Between Right and Wrong

In *Shane*, we see that there is a thin line between right and wrong surrounded by a very real grey area. Shane is trying to escape his past as a gunslinger by staying with the



Starretts. He has ceased wearing his gun, and he seems to have no intention of resuming the role of a frontier gunslinger. However, as events progress, Shane must renounce these ideals and step into the "grey area" to protect his friends.

From the beginning, Shane works out of the basis of his own moral code. He refuses to shoot a gun or even carry it with him, but he will not back down from a fight if needed. After Stonewall is killed by Wilson, Shane decides that he will finally have to take up his gun again to protect those he loves. With this decision, Shane steps into a grey area in which doing the right thing and doing the wrong thing often collide. By killing Wilson, Shane is walking back into the trap of being considered a gunslinger; however, he is simultaneously protecting the innocent people he loves. In the end, Shane risks both his reputation and his happiness to enter the grey territory between right and wrong and stand up for his friends.

Style and Cinematography

Shane has all the trademarks of a classic Western, including horses, the beleaguered homestead, and guns. The film decidedly seeks to meet audience expectations regarding what the setting should look like and how the characters should act. Since the film is based on the novel by Jack Schaefer, *Shane* tends to follow its plot almost exactly, meeting the needs of the book's readers as well as new viewers unfamiliar with the story.

The making of *Shane* involved much consideration and effort, and some of the lead actors had to make sacrifices in order to play their roles effectively. During the filming of *Shane*, actor Jack Palance (Wilson) was scared of horses, so he underwent extensive practice mounting his horse; however, in the end, only one good shot was taken of the mount, and it was used repeatedly throughout the film. In addition, *Shane*, as a former gunslinger, is expected to be a skilled handler of guns, but actor Alan Ladd had no such talent. Therefore, when *Shane* is in the saloon for his final showdown with Wilson, Ryker, and the gang, the fancy gun work he seems to execute is actually performed by a man named Rodd Redwing. Earlier in the film, *Shane* does demonstrate his marksmanship for Joey, and Alan Ladd is obviously performing in the scene; however, he was given a much simpler gun to use.

The final scene of the film, shot in half-darkness, has been considered somewhat ambiguous. *Shane* appears as though he may be slumping over his horse, dying. However, just moments earlier, he told Joey that he only had a small wound. Because of the darkness, it is difficult to know for certain what Stevens meant to depict in the scene. Since *Shane* does not die in the book, most believe that he simply rides away, knowing that life on the homestead and in the town can never be the same for him now that he has killed there. His gunslinger reputation has caught up with him, so perhaps he merely slumps in sadness over what he has lost.

Motifs

The Mysterious Stranger

Shane rides onto the homestead as a complete stranger with an unknown past. Often, in both film and novels, characters' lives drastically change when an unknown, mysterious stranger enters the picture. However, the question is always whether their lives will change for the better or for the worse; all readers or viewers know for sure is that characters' lives will inevitably be altered.

In *Shane*, the characters' lives are changed for the better. Shane may have a shady past as a gunslinger, but he proves to be a noble person while living with the Starretts. Shane stands up for them when they are cornered by Ryker's gang, and he is willing to sacrifice himself after Stonewall is murdered by Wilson. Although Shane's past influences his actions and ultimately forces him to leave the Starretts and the other homesteaders, their lives are positively affected by his impact: they can now focus on raising their families in safety and building a community for their children.

The Bullying Gang

What Western would be complete without a gang of bullies? Ryker and his gang persistently intimidate and terrify the less powerful homesteaders. Ryker is a cattle rancher who wants to take over all the land in the area so he can increase his herd and earn a greater profit. He will do anything to get what he wants, including cheating, terrorizing, and even killing people. Until Shane fortuitously shows up on the scene, the homesteaders' only hope of getting by is to do what Ryker says.

Shane confirms that he is good guy in the film by standing up to Ryker and Wilson. From the very beginning, he takes the side of the homesteaders by sticking around when Ryker's gang surrounds the Starrett homestead. Through his presence and bravery, Shane grants the homesteaders freedom from Ryker and his bullying gang.

The Noble Homesteaders

The homesteaders in the film are portrayed as honest individuals whose bravery is challenged by Ryker's repeated assaults. Most of them are intimidated by Ryker's threats, especially after Stonewall is killed. Joe, on the other hand, has no intention of abandoning his claim, because he wants a better life for Joey: a life with education, community, and love. He retains his noble ideals even when they could get him killed.

Although most of the homesteaders try to leave after Stonewall is killed, they are restrained by the encouraging words of Shane and Joe. Despite frightening obstacles, they are willing to stay, bravely and nobly, to the end, so their children can have good lives in the little town they are working to build. Their courage and commitment shines

through the film as they return home to salvage their lives after Ryker's strikes. Working together, the homesteaders seek to create their own positive community instead of succumbing to fear of Ryker and his gang.



Symbols

Guns

Guns symbolize power in *Shane*, and their prominence in the film helps reveal the motives of those in the story. Throughout the film, almost everyone wields a gun at some point. In the beginning, both Joe and Joey carry guns as they stand outside their home, and they use them to show Shane that they are brave and will not give in to Ryker's gang (the group they first believe him to be from). However, after Ryker rides up with all his men (and their many guns), the audience sees that Ryker's gang holds the most power in the current situation.

During most of the saloon scenes, those with guns initially seem to have the most power, yet Shane fights without a gun. Despite his prior experience as a gunslinger, Shane is trying to put his past behind him, and he does this by casting away his gun, at least for a time. Finally, he decides to bear arms again in order to protect his friends once and for all from Ryker and his gang. In the end, Shane is forced to leave because his renewed involvement with guns and killing will have a powerful negative impact on his reputation.

Fire

Toward the end of the film, Lewis, one of the homesteaders, finds that his house has been set on fire by Ryker's gang. He had left his house unprotected in order to transport his family away from the land claim, since the Ryker conflict was becoming too dangerous for comfort. During the homesteaders' final meeting to discuss the Ryker problem, Shane and Joe deliver compelling speeches about the need for the group to stick together. As the homesteaders waver, considering whether to stay or go, they suddenly realize that Lewis's house is on fire.

The fire at the house essentially lights a fire under the little group of homesteaders, inciting them to decision, unity, and action. They realize that unless they stick together, they will have no choice but to capitulate to Ryker's demands. The homesteaders rush to help Lewis extinguish the fire, and they even offer to help his family build a new home. The fire symbolizes a fresh start for the homesteaders, who are now committed to staying and protecting their claims.

The Homestead

The Starretts' claim is a place of sanctuary in the film. Although the dangerous forces of Ryker's gang circulate outside, the Starretts are relatively protected on their little plot of land. When Shane first joins the family, he is in the process of escaping his past as a gunslinger, and he finds that their house is a safe place to stay during this phase in his life. With Joey's innocence, Joe's work ethic, and Marian's care for others, both Shane

and the rest of the small community are nurtured, protected, and anchored by this loving family.

The homestead is also symbolic of the commitment to family that the Starretts so prize. Despite the chemistry between Shane and Marian, the audience is made to understand that the homestead is a safe place in which Marian would never consider betraying her family for Shane. The homestead functions as shelter from troublesome forces: it shelters Shane from his past; it shelters the Starrett family from the potential complication of the attraction between Shane and Marian; and it shelters everyone from Ryker and his henchmen. In the end, Shane fights with Joe at the homestead to shelter the family from further pain.



Essay Questions

Discuss the importance of and context for Shane's mysterious entrance into the Starrett's lives. In what way is such an event typical of film and literature?

How does Joey react to Shane in comparison with the way he reacts to his own father?

Why does Joe ask Shane to stay on the homestead with them?

Why do you think Shane actually decides to stay on the homestead?

How does Joe convince the homesteaders to stay on their own land?

Why does Ryker want all the land for himself, and how does he plan to get it?

Why does Shane get into a fight in the saloon during his first trip into town?

Why does Wilson kill Stonewall? How does this one event affect the rest of the story?

At the end of *Shane*, why does Shane beat up Joe before he goes into town?

Discuss the symbolism of Shane's decision to finally take his gun into town at the end of the film.

Describe Joey's feelings when Shane finally leaves.

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