

THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

Charles Laughton / USA / 1955 / 99 mins

MARGARET ATWOOD: WHY I LOVE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

From *The Guardian*, 19 March 1999

I'm incapable of choosing my single favourite anything, so I picked *The Night of the Hunter* for other reasons. First, it's among those films that made an indelible impression on me when it came out. That was in 1955, when I was a teenager and the theatres were blue with smoke: your boyfriend held his cigarette in one hand and attempted to sneak the other into your Peter Pan bra. What was on the screen was the secondary action, and it's a tribute to *The Night of the Hunter* that I can't remember which boyfriend I saw it with. So gripping was it that it warped my young brain, and several of its images have haunted me ever since. The underwater Shelley Winters, for instance, in her aspect of wrecked mermaid, has made several disguised appearances in my own writing.

My second reason was that (...) this film has an English connection. It was directed by Charles Laughton, who had a noteworthy stage career in London and made many English films before joining the European exiles who illuminated Hollywood from the thirties to the fifties. A bleak romantic trapped in an odd body, he often played monsters, which doubtless informed his direction of *The Night of the Hunter* - as did his interest in art and his wide literary and biblical background. Surely it's his sympathy with the material that enabled him to extract such extraordinary performances from the cast - Robert Mitchum, Shelley Winters, and Lillian Gish in particular.

The film came out in the same year as *The Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, so did not have the impact it deserved, although it has gathered a serious following since. European critics in particular have delved into its filmic influences, supplied Freudian analyses (frail mothers, sons and their torn loyalties to fathers, whether dead, fake, or ideal - vide the portrait of Abraham Lincoln tucked into the trial scene), and made Bettelheimian references to its fairy-tale depth-psychology, not to mention the depth -psychology of Laughton himself.

This film and its director appear made for each other - paradoxical, because *The Night of the Hunter* is such a profoundly American film. It is also a writers' film, another reason I chose it for a literary festival. For many films, the scenario serves only as a skeleton upon which the director hangs his own ideas and effects, but almost every image in this film - every rabbit, owl and so forth - was thoroughly described in the scenario. A script like this probably wouldn't get to first base in Hollywood today: it would be considered too wordy.

The film was adapted from a novel by Davis Grubb, and was written by James Agee, the author of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *A Death In The Family*, and of the film *The African Queen*. Both Grubb and Agee grew up in the Ohio valley during the Depression, which is where and when the film is set. Both were part of a general movement that turned away from the cosmopolitanism of the twenties to focus on the dark, poverty-stricken heartland of America. (...)

The film has a double framework. It opens with Rachel - an older woman whom we later meet as a rescuer of stray children - invoking the world of bedtime stories and dreams. (One might say that if this is her idea of a restful tale for kiddies she's a sadistic bitch, because this dream is a nightmare; but then, folktales have always been nightmares. Her job as narrator is to render the nightmare at least partially safe.) The next framework is a social one: the Depression, cause of the desperation that drives the film's initial robbery.

Within this double frame is the folkloric tale itself, with its ogre (played by Mitchum). His name is Harry, as in 'Old Harry', vernacular for the Devil. Cross Richard the Third with Milton's Satan and enclose him in a Southern psychopath posing as a preacher, and this character is what you'd get. He cannot be explained by the Depression - he is simply radical evil - but, in Laughton's hands, he's a complex figure as well, one of those fast-talking conmen who recur throughout American art, embraced by society, then torn apart by it. He's a monster, but finally a sacrificial one.

On one level the plot is simplicity itself: Dad has done a stick-up and stashed the money in a doll. This Mammonish idol, a Venus of Willendorf with its tummy stuffed with cash, becomes the desired treasure in the struggle between evil and innocence. The robber's two children - a girl and an older boy - have been sworn not to tell the doll's secret to anybody, especially not to their mother, the fleshy and therefore wilful Willa. Wolfish fellow-prisoner Harry knows about the money, but not where it's hidden; so after Dad is hanged he puts on his sheep's clothing and goes off to romance the widow, oozing sexual power from every pore but especially from his lower eyelids. Willa falls for it and marries him, but Harry's not interested in her body. He cuts her throat and sinks her in the river, then claims she's run off, as demonish women do.

Now he can get his hands on the kids. He forces the secret of the doll, but the children make their escape in a boat and go down the Ohio river, with the enraged preacher hunting them. It's a quintessential American image - the two floating innocents recall Huckleberry Finn and Jim, and, behind them, that favourite American biblical image, the Ark riding the Deluge with its Saving Remnant - in this case, the deluge that has overwhelmed the children's mother. That this particular deluge is all mixed up with adult sexuality, and also with the repression of it, is quintessentially American as well - it being the nature of Puritanism to produce a world which repudiates sexuality but is also thoroughly sexualised.

The children are sheltered by Rachel (who's a good woman, since she's well past sex), and stalked by their pursuer. Finally there's a standoff, a capture and a trial, and the villain is dead. But we can't breathe easy: the metaphysics are too unsettling. The film is punctuated by images of hands: towards the beginning, the preacher makes a puppet show with his knuckles, which have LOVE and HATE tattooed on them. Will love win out over

hate? If so, what kind of love? Does God himself love you or hate you, and if you place yourself in his hands, what is the nature of those hands? The hands return at the end, when there's a duet sung by Harry the monster and Rachel the saviour - incidentally, perhaps the only time Jesus has appeared in the guise of a sweet little old lady with a gun. They sing the hymn *Leaning On The Everlasting Arm* - they both sing it, but each is referring to a different arm; and at the end of every arm there's a hand, and for every right hand there's also a left.

But for every Song of Experience there's a Song of Innocence, and it's the child's-eye view that gives this film its translucence and candour. Its crucial perspective is that of the young boy, John Harper,

poised between innocence and experience. He alone distrusts the preacher from the beginning, he alone realises what's become of his mother; but, tellingly, he refuses to testify against her murderer. Son of a hanged killer and a butchered mother, stepson of a maniac, he has strong reason to distrust the adult world, but Rachel's house can shelter him only while he remains a child. Perhaps he will grow up to become a robber. Or perhaps, as his name suggests, a singer of bloodspattered sagas and the author of apocalyptic revelations? There's a happy ending complete with Christmas presents, but we don't credit it and neither should John. He knows too much. In other words, if it's the night of the hunter, what will it be the day of, once that morning sun comes up?

TRIVIA

Charles Laughton was so disappointed by the poor reception of this film on its initial release both critically and commercially, that he vowed never to direct a film again, and he never did.

A few months before filming began on The Night of the Hunter, Laurence Olivier learned about the film and campaigned heavily to play Preacher Powell, even though Mitchum was already cast in the role. Laughton was quite upset by the situation but United Artists agreed that Mitchum's name was more bankable than Olivier's when it came to ticket sales.

When Robert Mitchum first learned that Shelley Winters had won the part of Willa Harper, he said, "She looks and sounds as much like a wasted West Virginia girl as I do. The only bit she'll do convincingly is to float in the water with her throat cut."

Charles Laughton disliked children and so despised directing them in this film that Robert Mitchum found himself directing the children in several scenes.

Cinematographer Stanley Cortez did the photography for Orson Welles on *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942).

Sources: Internet Movie Database (imdb.com), TCM.com, cinematographers.nl