

***All That Heaven Allows* (1955)**

By John Wills

All That Heaven Allows is a rich and beautiful melodrama about love, class and society in 1950's New England. Directed by German-born Douglas Sirk, the film stars Jane Wyman as 40-ish widower Cary Scott, and Rock Hudson as Ron Kirby, a local young gardener and her romantic interest. The movie is based on a novel by Edna L. Lee and Harry Lee, with the screenplay adapted by Peg Fenwick. The film relates the complicated love affair of the two leads, especially the obstacles thrown in their way, from Ron's younger age and lower status that provokes family disapproval and social stigma, to a treacherous snow fall sabotaging their fate together.

Released in the winter of 1955, movie critics initially dismissed *All That Heaven Allows* as a soap opera of limited scope and sophistication. Bosley Crowther, writing for *The New York Times*, belittled the movie as "frankly feminine fiction," a "doleful domestic drama" marked by "emotional bulldozing" and "easy clichés." *Variety* found it difficult to "rouse much sympathy" for Wyman's "weak character," and described Rock Hudson's performance as "somewhat wooden" in his role as tree surgeon and gardener. One in a series of Douglas Sirk melodramas (*Magnificent Obsession*, also starring Wyman and Hudson, preceded it), *All That Heaven Allows* suffered from reviewer bias, with critics of the time often favoring more 'masculine' pictures such as Westerns.

All That Heaven Allows nonetheless oozes artistry, intellectualism, and period charm. There are delightful stylistic touches throughout the movie, from the way the lead characters express their emotions via little gestures (at home amidst trees, Ron waves his hands in a natural and relaxed style, in stark contrast to Cary's nervous energy and anxiety) to how Sirk cleverly employs colors on screen to amplify the emotions of individual scenes. Shot in Technicolor, the movie is visually rich and striking, intimate and inviting.

The movie also serves as valuable commentary on 1950's society. Sirk uses movie scenes to comment on a range of period issues, including social conformity, class difference, gender roles, and the pursuit of material wealth. The hollow and fake movie set feel of Sirk's suburbia cleverly highlights the facile nature of real suburban living. Rather than an optimistic picture of 1950's society, the movie cleverly underlines the limits of what 'Heaven' (or the 'good life') actually allows.

Most of this commentary is achieved through the individual experiences of Ron and Cary. Sirk uses the character of Cary to explore the mechanisms of judgment and repression surrounding women in the period. Cary is an attractive, affluent and privileged divorcee. However, rather than liberated or empowered by her position, she is trapped by the expectations of those around her. Her son and daughter boss her about. Male suitors physically impress upon her their desires (including one uncomfortable scene at the local country club). Friends tell her how to act. Only when a friendly doctor suggests Cary's ongoing headaches are due to heartache, with a prescription basically to "marry him," is Cary seen to healthily question the world around her, and act decisively. This sense of entrapment in the movie is all the more interesting when compared with real-life domestic experiences in the 1950s, highlighted in the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) not long after. Notably, Cary's daughter, Kay (played by Gloria Talbott), begins the movie full of feminist zeal, high education and independence - in one scene, she teaches her boyfriend about Freud and psychoanalysis - however, by the close of the movie, Kay's feminism seems less pronounced as traditional marriage beckons.

Sirk uses the character of Ron meanwhile to explore the merits of nonconformity and resistance. Ron is an outsider, pure of mind,

stubborn and rooted like a tree. Ron is anti-materialist, nature-loving, and the perfect embodiment of a 1950's Thoreauvian (Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is read aloud in the movie). Much of the aesthetic beauty of *All That Heaven Allows* comes from seeing the world through Ron's eyes: his simplicity of spirit, his restoration of a rustic old mill (his own personal Walden), and his love of silver-tipped spruce. Ron's wilderness romance is contagious and inspiring, and his rustic mill ultimately represents Sirk's real 'heaven' in the picture.

Sirk also weaves nature itself into the love story between the two leads. The film begins with doves together on a clock tower and a gift of a tree cutting for Cary from Ron, and ends with a snowy deer outside a rustic window while the couple embrace. Nature continuously shapes and contours the emotional narrative of the film.

While the two characters are passionately in love, their social worlds continuously collide. Cary's involvement in high society, marked by cocktail parties, status and formality, clashes spectacularly with Ron's love of wilderness, barn dances and deeper meanings. Sirk clearly favors the latter, and heavily nostalgizes rural America. While Ron's friends are genuine, Cary's are judgmental. The two dances, one at the country club and one at a rustic home, are offered to the viewer as direct comparatives of the two worlds; the first is outwardly sumptuous and decadent, but barbarism and backstabbing lurks just

beneath the surface; by contrast, while the dancing in the rural idyll is rough-and-ready, the people are warm, genuine and pleasant.

Sirk further employs the film to target consumer trends of the period. He particularly dislikes the television. Cary's son Ned (William Reynolds) gifts a TV set to her at Christmas to stave off boredom. The television is hailed as "Life's parade at your fingertips," by the deliveryman, but ultimately serves as the "last refuge for lonely women." The latter sentiment is captured perfectly when Cary emptily gazes at the screen of the newly installed set. Yet to be turned on, the machine simply mirrors her own image: a woman lost, lonely and bereft, and something beyond a technological fix. While itself very much a product of the 1950s, Sirk's film brilliantly challenges the conventions of the decade, and yearns instead for simpler, better times. *All That Heaven Allows* is thus a gloriously subtle and subversive title.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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