

The Wind

By Fritzi Kramer

“The Wind” is legendary for its raw emotional power, its skillful direction and the triumphant performances of its leads. Lillian Gish, Lars Hanson and director Victor Sjöström (credited during his time in Hollywood as “Seastrom”) had previously worked together on “The Scarlet Letter” (1926), a creative and commercial hit, and Gish had chosen a psychological western written by Texas native Dorothy Scarborough as their next vehicle. The novel focuses on Letty, a sophisticated Virginia girl who is forced to relocate to a remote ranch in Texas. Driven to the brink of madness by the harsh weather and unceasing wind, Letty’s situation becomes worse when circumstances force her to accept a marriage proposal from Lige, a rough cowboy. Roddy, a sophisticated city man, takes advantage of Letty’s fragile mental state and rapes her. Letty responds by shooting him and then races outside, giving herself to the wind. It’s easy to see the appeal of this intense work, especially in the visual medium of silent film.

Gish later wrote that playing innocent heroines, roles she sarcastically described as “Gaga-baby,” was an enormous challenge.¹ So much sweetness and light could quickly bore audiences if it wasn’t played just right but a villain could ham things up with impunity. Gish had dabbled in different parts, playing a street-wise tenement dweller in “The Musketeers of Pig Alley” (1912) and a heartless vamp in the lost film “Diane of the Follies” (1916), but film audiences were most taken with her more delicate creations. “The Birth of a Nation,” “Broken Blossoms,” “Way Down East,” “The White Sister” and “La Bohème” featured roles with the ethereal and often tragic quality that became Gish’s signature. On the surface, it looked as though “The Wind” was heading in the same direction but Gish and Sjöström had something more complicated up their sleeves.

In Gish’s pictures with D.W. Griffith, her naïve antics were met with indulgent smiles; only cads, gossips and snarling villains would resent such a sweet creature. In “The Wind,” Gish’s Letty takes up residence at Sweetwater, a dusty ranch owned by her cousin Beverly (Edward Earle) and his wife Cora (Dorothy Cummings). Letty’s charms win over Beverly and his children but Cora soon comes to resent the interloper. Rather than portray her as a heartless villain, Sjöström lays out Cora’s case before the audience. He shows Letty ironing the ruffles of her printed silk gown and nursing the blisters that result from her first brush with manual labor. Cora, meanwhile, is



Lillian Gish endures the psychological punishment meted out by The Wind. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

wearing a burlap sack over her dress and gutting a steer. Her hands are smeared in blood and as a result, both her husband and children ignore her in favor of the dainty Letty despite her desperate pleas. While Cora labors to put food on the family table, Letty worries about keeping her impractical Virginia fashions looking pretty. Cora’s pain and resentment are powerfully conveyed by Cummings.

Once Cora throws Letty out of her house, Lars Hanson and Gish create one of the sadder love scenes in silent cinema. Letty takes up Lige’s offer

of marriage and being a naturally extroverted and cheerful fellow, Lige attempts to make his new bride at home by offering her coffee. One lump or ten? Open conflict is not Letty's forte and so she accepts the coffee she does not really like and surreptitiously dumps it into the wash basin, an act that neatly symbolizes her relationship with Lige.

Sjöström directs Lige's attempt to seduce Letty by focusing primarily on the performers' feet as they pace back and forth, nervous, frustrated and, finally, angry. When Lige tries to force a kiss on Letty, he feels the full withering blast of her contempt; she shouts that she hates him. Realizing she has hurt him, Letty tries to explain. Lige understands and promises to help her get back to Virginia. As he leaves the bedroom, he notices the coffee in the wash basin. He looks up with a sardonic smile, realizing that she even deceived him about something as small as a cup of coffee. Gish and Hanson's chemistry causes the scene to crackle with tension, Sjöström amplifies that tension and the performers trade off in vying for audience sympathy.

While these scenes are excellent, it is Lillian Gish's deep understanding of Letty's psyche that makes "The Wind" a masterpiece. Gish takes us along on Letty's stumbling journey toward emotional maturity. At the beginning of the film, Letty is taken in easily by the superficial; she is a pragmatic character, even egocentric, but she is not wicked. The psychological punishments that the film inflicts on her do not fit her crimes, which make her eventual journey to the brink of madness much more tragic and engrossing. This is a real person being driven insane. At the climax of the film, Letty's nervousness has evolved into outright hysteria. As the wind swirls around her, blowing

in dirt through the door and the broken window, Letty looks out toward the desert. She shot Roddy and buried his body but the wind is uncovering her crime. She screams as the sand sifts away from his corpse. Gish's entire body expresses her unbridled terror, she curls into a fetal position, shaking and crying and trying desperately to block out the wind.

While the original novel ended tragically, screenwriter Frances Marion grafted together a happy ending for Lige and Letty—all known drafts of the script show a romantic reconciliation between the leads and a tragic ending was never filmed²—and Sjöström keeps back just enough detail to create ambiguity. Was Letty's shooting of Roddy real or a hallucination? Once again, Gish rises to the challenge and her slightly frenzied embrace of Lige during the final scene increases the uncertainty.

"The Wind" shows the American silent motion picture at the pinnacle of its artistry, the acting and the visual language of the film convey its complicated psychological story with clarity and power. While the studio silent film would be dead soon after, "The Wind" remains a formidable testament to the art's power.

¹ Lillian Gish and Ann Pinchot, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me* (London: W.H. Allen, 1969)

² Charles Affron, *Lillian Gish: Her Legend, Her Life* (New York: Scribner, 2001)

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

Fritzi Kramer is the founder of the silent film website [Movies Silently](#). She has written for The Keaton Chronicle and the San Francisco Silent Film Festival.