

Sunrise: A Song Of Two Humans

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Research Article

Sunrise, also known as “Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans,” is an American silent film released in 1927. It was an adaptation of a short story entitled “The Excursion to Tilsit.” The film tells the story of a young married man who is in love with his mistress. They both devise a plan to kill the man’s wife by drowning her. However, the man later realizes the evilness of his plan and cannot bring himself to overturn the boat. After the wife suspects his plan, she flees away in fear. The man tries hard to reconcile with her, begging for forgiveness until she does forgive him and lives happily ever after. After its release, the film became an immediate critical and commercial success, drawing large audiences to the cinema theaters (Porter). Sunrise was the first film to win the Best Picture award at the 1st Academy Awards ceremony in 1929. Its charm has not diminished even after many decades, as it is considered one of the greatest films ever made. According to my thesis, the theme of the film is the cultural war in the 1920s between modern and anti-modern principles.

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans belongs to the silent film era. It came at a time when silent films were slowly fading away in favor of the emerging sound films. Thus, the film lies between the great era of silent films and the great era of sound films. The film featured a variety of coordinated sounds that can be heard for the duration of the film. The audience can hear a pig squeal, car horns, and even human voices in the City. This was new for cinema audiences in the late 1920s who had never heard any sound in films and were used to intertitles in order to understand the story’s plotlines. Intertitles are also not used throughout the film, and apart from the audio used in the film for the first time, the director, F.W. Murnau, used parallel shots to use the actors’ expressions and the tense environment around them to prepare the audiences for the film’s story.

Every film ever made presents a cultural context, which has a deep influence on the film’s plot and how it proceeds. The film, as discussed above, was released at the end of the 1920s. The 1920s, often called the “Roaring Twenties,” was a decade of massive social, cultural, and political change. The world was transforming and moving towards economic development. People were becoming members of a ‘consumer society’ who bought the same clothes, followed the same fashion trends, and listened to the same music due to the power of mass advertising. Traditional values were eroding in favor of modern norms and values, which were also embodied by the flapper. People preferred living in cities rather than villages because of the urbanization taking place. People, especially women, were becoming sexually liberated and were given the right to vote. A cultural conflict also took place as many traditional people opposed the rapid modernization. This conflict has been portrayed in Sunrise very efficiently. The film presents a struggle between the decade’s traditional and modern values. This struggle can be seen in Man’s indecision to leave his farm life and traditional wife behind for a

modern city life with a modern flapper woman. The Wife is portrayed a naïve, simple, value-oriented woman who is dedicated to her husband, child and the household. This is in stark contrast with her husband's mistress, who is liberated from social values and refuses to conform to them. She is the representation of the modern urban life many people in the '20s strived to achieve.

The setting of the film, *Sunrise*, has a profound impact on the story. The film is set in a small village, where the whole village community is tightly woven in one single thread. The setting of the village and the life lived by Man and Wife presents an anti-modern outlook of life, which was advocated by many people in the West during the '20s. However, the arrival of the Woman from the city disturbs this setting, as she is a symbol of rapid modernity that is taking place at the same time. In spite of showing a conflict between the era's modern and anti-modern themes, it is notable that the setting prefers traditionalism over modernism. All the scenes of *The Woman from the City* take place during the night while the Wife is seen in broad daylight (Haskell). As day and night are associated with good and evil, it can be said that the film shows its preference for traditional norms over liberal ones. It can also be judged by Man's uncertainty to kill his wife and the rekindling of their romance. The tightly woven community shown in Man's village and the individualistic life shown in the city, the latter of which urges the couple to go back home, also serves a message of how modern life is eroding a traditional view of life, love, the sacredness of relationships and one's place in the society.

The film presents three central characters: the Man, the Wife, and the Woman from the city. The story is about a Man who is persuaded by his seductive mistress to sell his farm, drown his wife in the lake, and move with her to the city. These three characters are very crucial to the film's theme. It has been discussed above that the woman from the city is the embodiment of a man's desire to leave behind his village life and move into the city. During the Roaring Twenties, many people left behind their simple village lives in favor of modern urban city lives because of employment opportunities. The Man is smitten with a flapper, wears make-up, short skirts, and a bob, and smokes cigarettes. The flapper was the name used during the 1920s for a young woman who went against the social mores set by the pre-World War 1 generations. This was done by the refusal to wear long clothes or corsets and by trimming down one's long hair. Flappers were a symbol of women's emancipation, freedom, and sexuality that they had been denied for centuries (Reinsch). This concept is represented by the woman in the city. On the other hand, the perseverance of returning back to traditional mores and the triumph of those mores over modern themes of the time have been presented by Man's wife, who is able to forgive his husband for deviating from the sacred relationship between a married couple in the pursuance of seduction.

The film is also a story of forgiveness and the rebirth of true love. Although the Man wishes to leave his rural wife for his urban mistress, he loves her enough to get furious when he is suggested to kill his wife. His devotion towards his wife is also shown when he is unable to bring himself to overturn the boat and drown her. When, once ashore, she flees away from him in terror, he pursues forgiveness. The Wife is showered with flowers and other gifts by Man, which serve as his remorse and guilt for wishing to cause her harm. They are finally united when the Wife accepts his apology. Distracted by the hustle and bustle of city life, they head back home to start a new life with each

other. The birth of their love, respect and devotion to each other is best summed up by the film's title, 'Sunrise' which predicts the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

Sunrise was a landmark production for its time. It was introduced to audiences when silent films were becoming a trend of the past, and talkies were on the threshold of introduction. The film also hit a cultural landmark, as it preferred conservation values to liberal norms that had taken the West by storm. It presents a sensuality and sentimentality that is no longer found in present films. The cultural civil war that was taking place during the time and the people's attitude towards it have been perfectly captured in every scene. Due to its cultural significance, it was also awarded during the 1st Academy Awards ceremony. Even today, Sunrise stands at the crossroads of old and new values. Its cinematography, visuals, and production were groundbreaking, and its message is universal, which can also be seen by the names of the characters, who are simply called Man and Wife.

Works Cited

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