

SHANE

Study Guide



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❖ Introduction ❖

In 1862, the United States Congress passed the first of many “Homestead Acts,” a series of legislation that gave away more than 270 million acres over the period of four decades. The parameters were simple: if a homesteader could live on and improve a parcel of land for five years, the land was theirs. In response to these laws, thousands of settlers headed west, looking to create a new home and new communities for their families.

The film *Shane* centers around such homesteaders, depicting family life on a ‘claim’, the community created between homesteaders and their hope to come together to build something good for their children. Central to the plot of the film is one of the greatest challenges that faced settlers in undeveloped areas — the lack of adequate police enforcement and protection. The local sheriff was often more than a day’s ride from a homestead.

As a result, disputes frequently had to be resolved without the help of formal law enforcement. Gangs developed, applying vigilante “justice” through force, making an already difficult life more strenuous for homesteaders and their families. In response, homesteaders either had to follow the gangs’ rules or abandon their land and all the work they put into it. Failure to do so could lead to deadly force.

In the film, Ryker, a rancher who had settled in the Grand Teton valley before the homesteaders arrived, tries to employ such a “might makes right” strategy, even hiring a gun-man to help enforce his conception of justice — which involved scaring away or murdering the homesteaders.

Into the midst of this conflict arrives the soft-spoken Shane, who fits the Western trope of a stranger with a mysterious past who rides to the rescue. Though his past is never fully revealed, one of his final lines, “Can’t break the mold. I tried it and it didn’t work for me,” implies that the mysterious gun-slinger had a more violent history which he was trying to leave behind. Yet, much like Joe Starrett, Shane’s ties to the community in the Grand Teton valley prove stronger than his desire to stay out of conflict with Ryker and his gang.

Based on Jack Schaefer’s 1949 book of the same name, *Shane* adds to the mythology of Western cinema through the introduction of an unusual narrator. In the novel, the story of Shane is told from the perspective of the 11-year-old son of a homesteader; the film mirrors this perspective through the role of young Joey Starrett, who develops an endearing relationship with Shane.

Throughout the film, scenes are shot from a unique vantage point to convey that Joey is ever watching. The result is a sense that the heroism of Shane, the hardships and hopes of life in community and the villainy of Ryker are all seen from the perspective of a child, and that the film must be understood from this perspective.

“He was a man like father in whom a boy could believe in the simple knowing that what was beyond comprehension was still clean and solid and right.”

— Jack Schaefer, *Shane* (novel)



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❖ Memorable Quotes ❖

Marian Starrett: You're both out of your senses. This isn't worth a life, anybody's life. What are you fighting for? This shack, this little piece of ground, and nothing but work, work, work? I'm sick of it. I'm sick of trouble. Joe, let's move. Let's go on. Please!

Joe Starrett: Marian, don't say that. That ain't the truth. You love this place more than me.

Marian Starrett: Not anymore.

Joe Starrett: Even if that was the truth, it wouldn't change things.

Joe Starrett: This is farmin' country, a place where people can come and bring up their families. Who is Ruf Ryker or anyone else to run us away from our own homes? He only wants to grow his beef and what we want to grow up is families, to grow 'em good and grow 'em, grow 'em up strong, the way they was meant to be grown. God didn't make all this country just for one man like Ryker.

Joe Starrett: I'm not belittlin' what you and the others did. At the same time, you didn't find this country.

Marian Starrett: Guns aren't going to be my boy's life!

Joey: Why do you always have to spoil everything?

Shane: A gun is a tool, Marian; no better or no worse than any other tool: an axe, a shovel or anything. A gun is as good or as bad as the man using it. Remember that.

Marian Starrett: We'd all be much better off if there wasn't a single gun left in this valley — including yours.

Joey: We want you, Shane.

Shane: Joey, there's no living with... with a killing. There's no going back from one. Right or wrong, it's a brand. A brand sticks. There's no going back. Now you run on home to your mother, and tell her... tell her everything's all right. And there aren't any more guns in the valley.

❖ Thoughts for Discussion ❖

1. In the middle of the film, amongst the mounting tension and fear, the homesteaders gather together to celebrate Independence Day, which also happens to be Joe and Marian's tenth wedding anniversary.

What can we learn about the importance of celebration from the homesteaders, who do so even in the midst of great conflict? What does this scene tell us about the importance of community, marriage and family?

2. The Independence Day scene includes the characters Axel "Swede" Shipstead and his mother, both Swedish immigrants, and Stonewall Torrey, a man with obvious ties to the former Confederate state.

What does this scene teach us about patriotism? How does it highlight the American spirit and dream? Swede gives the Independence Day speech — is this significant, considering he is the only non-native-born American present? Why or why not?

3. Throughout the film, we see Joe Starrett lead his fellow homesteaders in resistance against Ryker's attempts to buy or scare them off of their land.

What is the importance of the land to the homesteaders? To Ryker? Why do we feel strong connections to the places we live, grow up, or work? To what length should we go in order to protect our homes?

4. **Marian accuses Joe of standing up to Ryker only out of pride. Consider his response: “Marian, honest, it’s because you mean so much to me that I’ve got to go. Do you think I could go on living with you and you thinking that I showed yella? Then, what about Joey? How do you think I’d ever explain that to him?”**

Is Marian right that Joe is acting out of pride? Or is Joe’s motive a noble one? What does his motive tell us about a man’s role in regard to his wife and children? How does Shane play into this dynamic – especially in regard to Joey?

5. **During one attempt to buy Joe’s land, Ryker defends his actions, saying that it was he and his men who completed all the hard work from which the homesteaders now benefit.**

Are Ryker’s comments merely rationalization or is there truth in them? What rights do we have to the fruit of our labor? To what extent should those fruits be shared with others? What responsibilities do we have to those whose work made our lives possible — think not only about your parents and mentors but others in your life who have played important but less visible roles?

6. **Following the death of the homesteader Stonewall Torrey, Shane tries to convince the other homesteaders to stay in the valley. He says, “Know what you want to stay for? Something that means more to you than anything else — your families — your wives and kids. Like you, Lewis, your girls. Shipstead with his boys. They’ve got a right to stay here and grow up and be happy. That’s up to you people to have nerve enough to not give it up.”**

What does Shane’s speech tell us about the vocations of marriage and fatherhood? What does he see as the duty of a husband and father? Is he right? What other relevant responsibilities might his speech neglect to mention?

7. **When Joe Starrett tries to confront Ryker, he is stopped by Shane. Shane then goes to confront Ryker himself, releasing Joe Starrett’s horse into the wild so that he cannot be followed.**

Why did Shane do this? Was he keeping Joe Starrett from completing his duty as a father and husband to protect his family? Was he assisting Joe Starrett in that duty?

8. **When Shane begins to work for Starrett, he buys new clothes. When he leaves to fight Ryker, Shane changes back into the leather clothes he wore at the beginning of the film.**

What does this symbolize? What is the importance of appearance in the film? What is the importance of appearance in our own lives?

9. **The film ends with Shane riding away, injured, while Joey calls after him, pleading that he stay.**

Why does Shane leave the Starrett family, even though he was so loved by them? Should he have stayed? What role or duty might he have to Joey, to whom he became a second father figure? Is he shirking or fulfilling that responsibility by leaving the Starrett family?

10. **Logan director James Mangold has repeatedly discussed how *Shane* impacted his work, stating, “I am always reminded, through Joey and this film, of one of the most bittersweet facts. That the course of our lives can be profoundly changed by folks who sometimes cannot stay. The temporary nature of some relationships in our lives does not diminish their power and, in fact, sometimes enlarges them.”**

Do we recognize the importance and power of such temporary relationships? Do we avoid treating short-term relationships seriously so to avoid pain at the relationship’s end? Is it right to do this? Is it wise? Is it just?