



Irish Film Institute

WITNESS

STUDYGUIDE

Alicia McGivern

IFI EDUCATION





SECTION TITLES

1. Introduction
2. Background
3. The World of the Film
4. The Vision of the Film
5. How does the film tells its story?
6. Sequences for study
7. Key moments
8. Useful references



INTRODUCTION

Witness (1985) was directed by Australian filmmaker Peter Weir, and stars Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis. A considerable box office success on its release, the film received eight Academy Award nominations, winning two for the screenwriters and editor. *Witness* combines the genre of the thriller, western and melodrama, and brings together the two very different worlds of the rural Amish and the city police. It is an excellent choice for Leaving Certificate Comparative study and offers many possibilities for analysis of theme, setting and cultural context, literary genre and relationships.

SYNOPSIS

The Amish community, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. A young widow, Rachel, takes her son Samuel on the train to Baltimore to visit her sister. Delayed in Philadelphia train station, Samuel witnesses a man being brutally murdered in the toilets. Detective John Book arrives to investigate and insists that Rachel and Samuel delay their departure, as the boy is his only witness. Samuel fails to identify anyone in the police line-up but later recognises one of the culprits from a newspaper cutting about McFee, an award-winning police officer. Book tells his superior, Schaeffer, who advises him to keep quiet. Later, Book is shot in an underground carpark and he realises that he has uncovered a drug-related police conspiracy. He tells his partner to remove all papers regarding the case and drives Rachel and Samuel back to their farm.

Book has been badly wounded and cannot leave the Lapp farm. Rachel and her father-in-law persuade the community elders to allow them shelter him in their house, because of the danger to Samuel. Rachel nurses him back to health and there is a growing attraction between them. Eli criticises Rachel and warns her that other people suspect her feelings for the visitor. As soon as Book has recovered, he starts to help on the farm and uses his

carpentry skills at a barnraising. That night he observes Rachel bathing and although their mutual attraction is evident, he decides not to pursue it.

On a visit to town, Book phones Philadelphia from a call box and finds out that Carter has been killed. He calls Schaeffer to tell him that he knows. When a gang of youths taunt the Amish and Book goes to their defence, he gives himself away. That night Rachel goes to him, aware that he is preparing to leave. Next morning Schaeffer and his men arrive at the farm. In the final shoot out, the two cops are killed and Schaeffer is forced to surrender. Book then decides to return to the city and leave Rachel, who is now free to develop a relationship with Daniel.

CREDITS

John Book	<i>Harrison Ford</i>
Rachel Lapp	<i>Kelly McGillis</i>
Samuel Lapp	<i>Lukas Haas</i>
Schaeffer	<i>Josef Sommer</i>
Eli Lapp	<i>Jan Rubes</i>
Mc Fee	<i>Danny Glover</i>
Director	<i>Peter Weir</i>
Producer	<i>Edward S Feldman</i>
Screenplay	<i>Earl Wallace & William Kelley</i>
Story by	<i>William Kelley, Pamela & Earl Wallace</i>
Music	<i>Maurice Jarre</i>

USA, 1985, 112 mins, colour

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Find out about other films starring Harrison Ford. Do they share any common themes?
2. Read the synopsis of the film above. What kind of film do you expect *Witness* to be? Explain your answer.



BACKGROUND

THE STORY

The story of *Witness* began in the early 70s with the involvement of three writers, Pamela and Earl Wallace and William Kelley. Novelist Pamela Wallace had an idea for a novel about an Amish woman who witnesses a murder in LA. Screenwriter Earl Wallace, who had written for the TV series *'How the West was Won'*, liked the idea and began to draft a script. He recalled an episode of the series that had an Amish story and he got in contact with the writer.

Kelley had observed and admired the pacifist Amish community during his time as a seminarian in Lancaster County. In 1972, he wrote an episode for *GunsMoke* called 'The Pig Man', in which four brothers assault a girl from an Amish-like community called the Simonites. Richter, a gunslinger, defends the girl, kills one of the brothers and gets wounded. He is then taken into the community to recover, where he falls in love. The story was then reworked into the series *'How the West was Won'* and played in 1977.

CASTING

Earl and Kelley completed the screenplay, *Witness*. Then Hollywood producer Edward Feldman brought it to the attention of action hero, Harrison Ford. His interest in the script encouraged Paramount Studios to buy it. Australian filmmaker Peter Weir was appointed to direct what would become his first Hollywood picture.

CHANGING THE SCRIPT

Before production commenced, the screenplay underwent several changes. From being largely about Rachel travelling to her sister's in Baltimore, the focus was changed to make John Book (Harrison Ford), a readily identifiable hero – presumably in consideration of his star status. Commercial pressure led to

the love interest being developed: the dance scene was added but sexual contact between Rachel and Ford is limited to a kiss. A scene in which Rachel reacts to the apparent untidiness of Elaine's home by tidying it, offering further contrast in the women's lifestyles, was cut to avoid detracting from Book's story.

Other changes made to the script included the final scene, where the three police arrive to get Book: it was agreed that Samuel could not kill Schaeffer as an audience would not forgive this action from a child. If Rachel shot him or rang the bell, it would divert attention to her and away from the main character. Finally it was agreed that Samuel would ring the bell and the Amish would come forward to 'bear witness'. Weir opted for a non-verbal ending to the film, unlike the one proposed where Rachel would give him a gift of her husband's hat, which would suggest that they might meet again.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. *Having watched the film, read about the changes that were made to the script. In your group, discuss the changes. Do you think they were good? Why you think they were made?*
2. *What do you think of the ending to the film? Would you prefer a different ending? Why/Why not?*

HARRISON FORD FILMOGRAPHY (INCOMPLETE)

- HOLLYWOOD HOMICIDE (2003)
- K-19: THE WIDOWMAKER (2002)
- WHAT LIES BENEATH (2000)
- RANDOM HEARTS (1999)
- SIX DAYS SEVEN NIGHTS (1998)
- AIR FORCE ONE (1997)
- DEVIL'S OWN, THE (1997)
- SABRINA (1995)
- CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER (1994)
- FUGITIVE, THE (1993)
- PATRIOT GAMES (1992)
- REGARDING HENRY (1991)
- PRESUMED INNOCENT (1990)
- INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE (1989)
- WORKING GIRL (1988)
- FRANTIC (1988)
- MOSQUITO COAST, THE (1986)
- WITNESS (1985)
- INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM (1984)
- STAR WARS: EPISODE VI - RETURN OF THE JEDI (1983)
- BLADE RUNNER (1982)
- RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK (1981)
- STAR WARS: EPISODE V - THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK (1980)
- APOCALYPSE NOW REDUX (1979)
- STAR WARS (1977)

PETER WEIR, FILMMAKER

Peter Weir was born in Sydney, Australia in 1944, of Irish, English and Scots heritage. As a young man, he went travelling in Europe, during which time he became interested in the nature of Australian identity. He then returned home to work in Australian television. The 1970s were a time of little indigenous filmmaking in Australia and Weir became involved in initiatives to develop an industry. His first feature as a director was one section of a three-part film on youth for the Commonwealth Film Unit.

Among the 200 feature films made during these early years¹, was Weir's mystery drama *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK AND OTHER FILMS

A group of girls from Appleyard College visit the volcanic formation of Hanging Rock on Valentine's Day. During the visit, three of the girls and a teacher disappear, never to be seen again. The open-ended narrative and the enigmatic mood of this film make it closer to a European style of filmmaking than to Hollywood.

Weir's dislike of formal education, later to be reflected in *Dead Poet's Society*, is apparent throughout the film. He offers two realities: the real and oppressed world of Appleyard college and the psychic world to which the girls are drawn by being at the Rock. This notion of being caught between cultures becomes a recurring theme in the Director's work. In *Picnic*, it is evident between the English boy, Michael, and the Australian Albert, or between the Aboriginal people who are called upon to help search and the local police who are 'baffled'. The film also depicts the Rock as providing a gateway to sexuality: the girls remove their stockings, the teacher is later reported to have removed her skirt.

However, eroticism is merely suggested rather than explicitly drawn.

Picnic was a remarkable success for an Australian film and Weir continued to pose cultural questions in subsequent work. In *Gallipoli*, he explores the nature of male friendship and Australian-ness against the backdrop of the tragedy of Gallipoli. In *The Year of Living Dangerously*, a young Australian journalist takes a job as foreign correspondent in Indonesia in 1965, where he is befriended by a Chinese-Australian cameraman.

Witness was Weir's first Hollywood outing and for it he combined an awareness of the expectations of genre cinema with his own independent style. Since then, the director has worked with a range of genre including romantic comedy (*Green Card*) and recently he received an Oscar nomination for his wartime sea epic, *Master and Commander*.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Do you know of any other Australian filmmakers?
What kind of films do they make?
2. Why do you think Peter Weir was chosen to direct *Witness*?
3. From the information given above, do you recognise any common features in his work?
4. Watch any other Peter Weir film from the filmography and compare it with *Witness* as an example of the director's style.

¹ For more information on the Australian film industry, see the IFI EDUCATION study guide on *Strictly Ballroom*.

PETER WEIR FILMOGRAPHY (DIRECTOR)

- MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD (2003)
- TRUMAN SHOW, THE (1998)
- FEARLESS (1993)
- GREEN CARD (1990)
- DEAD POETS SOCIETY (1989)
- MOSQUITO COAST, THE (1986)
- WITNESS (1985)
- YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, THE (1982)
- GALLIPOLI (1981)
- PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK (1975)
- CARS THAT ATE PARIS, THE (1974)

THE AMISH

Origins

The Amish (pronounced Ah-mish) are a religious group of whom 150,000 live in North America. The first Amish, named after Jakob Ammann, arrived in the US in the early 1700s, escaping religious persecution in Europe. Originally called Anabaptists, meaning re-baptised, they believed that only adults should be baptised. Later, the Amish, Mennonites and Brethren sects emerged, differing in their interpretations of the Bible, their use of technologies, the values they place in education, their use of English and their interaction with others.

Technology and Prayer

The Amish believe 'worldliness' keeps one from closeness to God. They do not have church buildings, but choose to worship in each other's homes as a community of believers. Samuel's unfamiliarity with church-like buildings is evident in his sense of awe at the enormity and grandeur of Philadelphia train station.

Traditionally the Amish avoided modern technology such as cars or electricity but nowadays they adopt technology according to their assessment of its effects on their community.

In the film, we can see different attitudes towards technology: for example, the Lapp family has no phone but the Mennonites do. The Amish believe that the private phone excludes the community and contributes to individualism. To avoid this, there are often shared community phone boxes in their areas.

Language

The Amish speak Pennsylvania German, a dialect of High German. The Pennsylvania German word for "German" is "Deutsch", which sounds similar to the English "Dutch", hence the term Pennsylvania Dutch often used to describe their language.

Customs

Amish life is slow and simple, close to the land. It is centred on the community, united by activities such as barnraising. Typically, a barnraising will start at dawn: all the men work on the barn while the women prepare a noon meal, often served outside. The roofing is installed in the afternoon.

Costume

Plainness marks the Amish costume. Men wear broad-brimmed hats of felt, or straw in warmer weather. The women wear a plain bonnet under which their hair is fastened modestly (Rachel removes the bonnet before going to Book in the field). At a husband's funeral, the widow will wear the white apron she wore on her wedding day and re-marriage usually takes place within a year after the death of a spouse. The men do not shave their beards after marriage, hence the difference between the young single men and the elders. With an emphasis on humility and plainness, people are not encouraged to take photos, which glorify appearance.

Code of Conduct

The Amish live by the *Ordnung*, a code of conduct that the church maintains by tradition. Eli refers to the *Ordnung* when warning Rachel of her attraction to Book. If a church member breaks the vows, they risk being shunned by the other members of the community. This can include not eating with the person, as Eli warns Rachel. However, though it may seem harsh to non-Amish, its aim is to redeem the individual rather than punish. When Amish teenagers become 16, they are allowed the freedom to explore the customs of the outside "English" world – including alcohol, drugs and sex – before deciding whether to join the Amish church for life or leave the community altogether.²

The Amish and the Outside World

Throughout the US, there is evidence of harassment of the Amish, by buggy-slashing, hat-stealing, or more brutal assaults such as

that which formed the basis of this story (See page 3). Often the incidents will go unreported: the Amish take a pacifist approach as we see in the film when local youths taunted the group in the town. The explanation for Book's behaviour is that he comes from Ohio, suggesting the different traditions that exist. In the film, the Amish serve as an object of curiosity for the townspeople. They live separately from 'The English' who are regarded with suspicion. Eli says 'be careful among the English'. Yet in reality, there is much contact between Amish and 'English' farms. It should come as no surprise to learn that in reality the Amish did not take too kindly to the intrusion into their community for the purpose of mass entertainment. The film was partly shot in the geographical area of the Amish (Lancaster County) but not on an Amish farm and the actors were non-Amish. The portrait of the community serves the narrative, rather than it being an in-depth study of this tradition.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. From the information above, discuss the lifestyle of the Amish community from a positive and negative point of view.
2. How does this information correspond with the representation of the community in the film?
3. Find out what you can about Amish people living in Ireland.
4. Do you know of other religious sects in this country? Find out about their traditions. Why do you think people might join these groups?

² This period is called 'Rumspringa' and is the subject of a documentary by Luigi Walker called 'The Devil's Playground'.



THE WORLD OF THE FILM

Social Setting/Cultural Context
Theme
General Vision and
Viewpoint

TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS

City vs country, corruption, redemption, love, cultural conflict, community vs individual, gender;

The City

Witness is set in the two very different worlds of the Amish community and the city. First we see the traditional, patriarchal community itself and then we see it in contrast with the modern world. When Rachel and her son Samuel embark on their journey to Baltimore, the Amish horse and trap is overtaken by the train, emphasising that the slow pace of Amish life is out of synch with reality. In Philadelphia train station, Rachel and Samuel stand apart from others in their costume and demeanour. Unlike within their community, everyone here is anonymous. Samuel wanders around curiously, seeking out the familiar and mistaking an Orthodox Jew in traditional costume for an Amish man. The city appears an alienating and then brutal place, where the murder of the man in the toilet is just another aspect of life, unlike the peaceful world they have left behind.

The police who arrive to investigate the murder seem somewhat inured to the crime, whereas Rachel and Samuel's complete unfamiliarity with such an experience is emphasised by their behaviour, as they sit huddled together on the bench. They have been brought abruptly into contact with the modern world, and they are moved to different places that epitomise this: the sleazy bar in which Book tracks down a suspect; his divorced sister Elaine's apartment; the fast food restaurant. There is a sense that Book – seen later carrying his laundry – is cleaning up the city and, not unlike Rachel, does not take part in its activities. In the bar, Book is cold and aggressive with the customers; in Elaine's untidy, overcrowded apartment he disapproves of her bringing men home. Both Elaine and Rachel are single parents, yet in Book's eyes at least, Elaine is unstable – even

immoral – while we have seen Rachel secure within her family. Next morning, Rachel introduces her traditions to the city by insisting on saying grace in the fast food restaurant. Although the food (hot dog) is familiar to them all, eating is a totally different experience. Book eats silently and quickly in the anonymous place, in order to get back to work. We see him later sitting down to breakfast with the Lapp family, where food is a celebration after hard work. Eli mocks him for not being able to eat properly, that he doesn't know what real work is.

As well as their lifestyle being out of step, the Amish pacifist beliefs do not belong on the outside: Rachel objects to Samuel spending time with a man who goes around 'whacking people'. The film seems to question the use of violence: Book uses a legalised method of control yet the other supposed upholders of the law are corrupt.

The Country

The scenes in the Philadelphia section are very fast-moving. As soon as the action moves back to the farm, the pace slows down accordingly, with Book literally crashing to a halt into the birdhouse. Book is a man who lives by the law (Book by name and nature, straight and law-abiding) and he has to adjust to an environment in which the usual rules by which he lives no longer apply. His gun is not welcome, his humour ('Now that's great coffee'³) is not understood, the music that he finds on the radio is forbidden. The other members of the community regard him at first with suspicion. To fit in and, so as not to attract attention, he is required to don the Amish plain costume, taking the suit of Rachel's dead husband, which, appropriately, doesn't quite fit him. But accordingly, he learns to wear it, with its hooks and eyes, and, finally, he 'looks plain'. However, it is really only when Book begins to contribute to the Amish way of life, milking cows and repairing the birdhouse, that he is more acceptable.

³ This was Ford's own addition to the script. Apparently he had been trying to star in the Maxwell House coffee ads for some time.

Finally, at the barn-raising, he is welcomed for contributing his carpentry skills to the effort. He also makes a toy wooden mill for Samuel, acknowledging the efficiency and even the magic of their traditional technology.

City vs Country

The contrast between the Amish world and that of the 'real' world outside is also marked in many symbolic ways. When the film opens, there is an emphasis on gold and brown colours. The melodic soundtrack by John Williams contributes to the sense of a quiet, agrarian community life as the people move through a wide-open landscape, with which they are in harmony. Their costumes indicate their common belonging. The colours of the opening scene are in contrast with the dark and depressing colours of the city, which is a hectic and enclosed place, where no one is dressed the same. Many of the police don't even wear uniforms. They work undercover but also, as we learn, are outside of the law. Later, their city suits are out of place on the Amish farm and McFee's city shoes cause him to slip in manure. Unlike Book who has become familiar with the workings of the farm and the livestock, and moves comfortably among the cattle, the three officers do not know where to go or how the buildings function. In this final scene, we see how Book has changed, from his experience within the community. In the end he doesn't shoot Schaeffer but chooses the path of peace. With the Amish standing around, bearing 'witness', the power of their communal action disempowers Schaeffer, who eventually surrenders. Book's arrival on the farm, was marked by his crashing into the birdhouse, into the Amish community and the Lapp household, both of which are disrupted by his arrival. By the end, with the birdhouse and order restored, it is time for him to leave. The community is also repaired and Rachel is ready to accept her situation.

Positive portrait

Despite the strict codes of behaviour and its anti-modernist stance, director Peter Weir does not offer any overt criticism of the Amish lifestyle. Indeed this world appears preferable in many ways to the 'real' crime-filled world outside. There is no critique of the suppression of women in what is a very patriarchal society either. We just learn that Rachel risks being shunned by the community for pursuing a relationship with an outsider. Yet she is tempted by Book and the scene in which he observes her bathing has an erotic charge that is not apparent in the rest of the film, or indeed in most of Weir's work. However, although we observe her bathing, significantly, she turns to the camera, making both Book and the viewer the object of her desire, suggesting her awakening sexuality.

While there is no examination of the oppressive rule of the *Ordnung*, there is ample evidence for the oppressive nature of the police force. At one point, Schaeffer tells Carter that the force is a cult as well as the Amish and that he has broken the rules of their cult. The penalty for this is not shunning but death, as experienced by Carter. In investigating his colleagues, Book takes the risk of ruining his career as well as being killed. In contrast, the Amish community is presented in a more positive and harmonious light, culminating in the barnraising in which they work together. Even Book is able to participate by providing an honest skill like carpentry⁴. In the city, in contrast, the people supposedly on the same side of the law, are in fact out of harmony with one another.

As Weir's first Hollywood film, we can speculate on studio pressure to create a portrait of the Amish that would not in any way cause offense. The Amish world is romanticised to a certain extent, even at the end when Book and Rachel part. Commercial interests undoubtedly favoured Harrison Ford's story, as he was the star, and the love

interest as is in keeping with genre cinema. But Weir avoids a traditional happy ending: although the two individuals have been tempted by individual desire, they return to their communities, which ultimately prove to be the stronger influence.

⁴ Before becoming an actor, Harrison Ford trained as a carpenter.



THE VISION OF THE FILM

General Vision and Viewpoint

There are various elements of the film that can be said to influence the audience's viewpoint. There is a stark contrast between the corrupt modern world of the individual and the old-fashioned moral world of traditional community life. The director's choice of colour and lighting (see Literary Genre), as well as the activities associated with each place and the behaviour of the characters, emphasise this distinction. Although the Amish world appears controlled and old-fashioned, at the same time there is no doubting the community's care and support of its members. This contrasts with the world from which Book has come, where individuals are more likely to be killing one another or existing dysfunctionally (eg. Book's sister, Elaine).

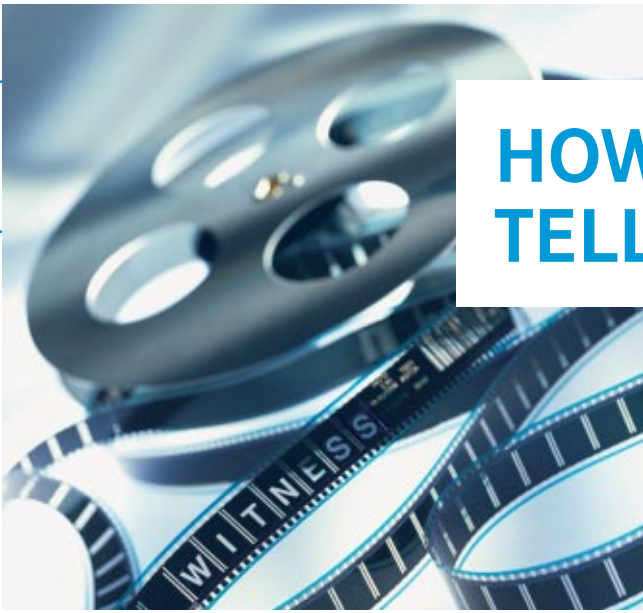
In the course of the story, the two central characters experience something of the other person's existence: Book lives among the Amish, learns their ways, and also reveals a gentler side to his character. Rachel becomes attracted to him and realises her sexuality in a way not considered appropriate in her patriarchal community.

Ultimately, of course, they return to their own worlds but there is no doubting that they have changed in some way. If the film had had a happy ending, it would not have been true to the strength of either community or to Weir's style. It's unlikely that a city cop like Book could adjust to this orthodox world and similarly Rachel would not fit in 'among the English'.

The title of the film refers to the initial incident which Samuel witnesses, and this provokes the action. At the end, the Amish bear witness to the crime of Schaeffer and his gang – the dark vision of the film. But in between, both Rachel and Book witness the dark and light sides of their respective worlds and in so doing, they opt to return to them.

STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. As a result of seeing this film, what is your view of:
 - (i) the world of the Amish?
 - (ii) the outside world?
2. This film is set in the 1980s. Do you think this view is relevant today? Why/Why not?
3. What are the dark and light sides of their respective communities that Rachel and Book witness, in your opinion?



HOW DOES THE FILM TELL ITS STORY?

Literary Genre and Aspect of Story

Witness uses a classic three-act structure to tell its story. Each act comprises several distinctive sequences. Strong turning points happen at the end of Act One and Two and these propel the narrative and add to the **tension**.

- **Turning Point 1:** *Book realises that Schaeffer is involved when McFee tries to kill him in the car park.*
- **Turning Point 2:** *Book drives the car into the birdhouse, which brings him into the Amish community.*
- **Turning Point 3:** *Schaeffer discovers Book when the policeman alerts him.*

Point 3 leads directly to the **climax** of the story, when the three policemen arrive at the farm.

This is a character-driven story, told in the **third person**, and it is predominantly centred on John Book. As a hero, Book drives much of the action and he undergoes dramatic changes as a result. In the beginning, he is portrayed as a fairly macho, abrupt and cynical product of the city's police force. He disapproves of his sister's lifestyle and shows little understanding towards Rachel and Samuel. By the end, however, through his contact with the Amish and Rachel, he has in some ways realised the gentler, more feminine side of his nature. We become aware of him changing when he dances in the barn, showing a previously unseen spontaneity. The other principle character, Rachel Lapp, also changes through her contact with him.

Witness is a cop thriller combined with the **genres** of the western and melodrama. The principle plot is the search for the murderer of the policeman and although this becomes an investigation of the police force itself, once Book arrives on farm, the love story takes over. We end up then with two plots, which are interwoven through Book's hiding out among the Amish. Although Peter Weir deliberately

slows down the action when it moves to the farm, at the same time **tension** builds up because of the growing mutual attraction between Book and Rachel and the fact that we know it won't be long before Book is discovered.

As a cop thriller, we get John Book the tough good guy, who is determined to uphold the law. There are scenes of armed pursuit and attack. The dark and depressing urban world of the cop movie is evident in the early scenes in Philadelphia, where the action moves between the train station toilets, the bar and the police station. The wide-open spaces of the western genre are visible in the opening scene and subsequent views of the farm. The Amish have tamed the landscape and live in harmony alongside it. Book's arrival in the community is not unlike the lone western hero who rides into town, such as in *Shane*, to defend the community that is under threat from outside elements. When the police arrive at the farm in Act Three, it resembles a scene in the classic western *High Noon*, where a non-violent man comes up against three other gunmen.

As a melodrama, *Witness* offers us a classical Romeo and Juliet scenario where the couple is in love, despite the disapproval of their respective communities. The odds are stacked against them and they fight against their desires for much of the story. It is only when they have nothing left to lose and they know that Book is leaving, that Rachel and he come together. Typical elements of a love story are the looks of longing that are exchanged between John and Rachel, their flirting - such as when he makes fun of the Amish aversion to buttons - as well as their courtship dance in the barn.

These elements lead us to expect a love scene and this adds to the tension. In contrast to their visible mutual attraction, there is no obvious chemistry between Rachel and Daniel.

When he visits her, they sit far apart on the porch swing while she watches Book walk by. But later, she appears naked before Book, revealing a hitherto unseen sexuality.

Both of these stories build to a **climax**. On the final night, Rachel goes to Book in the field. The soundtrack, by Maurice Jarre, underlines their passion. It then emphasises the tension that leads to the final shoot out and confrontation between Book and Schaeffer. The stories are subsequently resolved: Schaeffer gives himself up, Book returns to the city and Rachel to her community, despite their love for each other.

We can see, therefore, that *Witness* is a genre film. However, it also manifests the director's independent style in several ways. Firstly, Book is denied hero status on the farm as he must give up his gun and learn new ways. Secondly, there is no happy ending to the love story. Thirdly, another point of view to Book's is offered - that of Samuel Lapp. We experience Samuel's view of the train station and the murder and later it is his vision that condemns McFee. A child's eye view is then assumed by Book as he enters the Amish community. He loses his status, wears ill-fitting clothes reminiscent of Samuel's and later he stands around awkwardly when Daniel courts his mother on the swing.

Finally it is Samuel who saves the family by ringing the bell, but authority is then handed over to Book who is now ready to reassert it. In exchanging the child's point of view with the central character's, Weir demonstrates his ability to successfully combine a genre piece with his own individual style.

Student Explorations

1. Describe one scene in which John Book shows that he is changing and explain the reasons why, in your opinion.
2. Do you think Rachel changes? How? Describe Rachel at the beginning and at the end of the film.
3. Pick any scene from the film that belongs to the thriller/western/melodrama genre. What elements of the genre are in this scene? Discuss.
4. How does the filmmaker create tension? Describe any moment of tension in the film and how it is achieved. Consider visual elements, soundtrack, action.
5. What do you think of Samuel Lapp? Does he change in the course of the film?



SEQUENCES FOR STUDY

1. AN AMISH FUNERAL

- Members of the Amish community gather for a funeral.
- The community prays, then eats together.
- Men and women sit separately. The widow, Rachel, is comforted by her friends and by Daniel Hochleitner.
- Daniel and Ely Lapp accompany Rachel and Samuel to the train station.

2. MURDER IN PHILADELPHIA TRAIN STATION

- Rachel and Samuel wait in the train station where they stand out from everyone else.
- In the toilets, Samuel witnesses two men brutally murder a third.
- He hides in a cubicle and is nearly caught by them.
- The police arrive to investigate and they meet John Book.
- Book brings them to a bar to look for suspects, then to his sister's house to spend the night

3. UNCOVERING SUSPECTS

- Next day in the police station, Samuel fails to identify anyone in the line-up.
- They visit a fast food bar and then Samuel identifies a policeman in a photo as one of the men involved.
- Book informs his superior, Schaeffer, but he is later shot by McFee in an underground car park
- He warns Carter to remove all the paperwork.
- Schaeffer and McFee find Book's car in his sister's garage.
- Book drives them back to the Amish farm but on leaving, he crashes the car into the birdhouse.

4. RECOVERING ON THE AMISH FARM

- Rachel persuades the Amish elders to let Book stay to save Samuel.
- They hide his car in the barn.
- She nurses him back to health and there is a growing attraction between them.
- Schaeffer finds out how difficult it is to get information from the Amish.
- Book starts to recover.
- Samuel finds his gun and he gives it to Rachel. Eli talks to Samuel about killing.
- Rachel gives Book her dead husband's clothing and he goes to town to phone his partner.

5. BOOK AND RACHEL

- Back on the farm, he befriends young Samuel.
- Eli asks him to help on the farm.
- Book is woken at dawn to milk cows after which he eats

breakfast with the family.

- Daniel calls on Rachel but she is distracted by Book.
- He repairs the car in the barn and they dance to music on the radio
- Eli interrupts them and chastises Rachel, warning her. She rejects his criticism.

5. BOOK IS ACCEPTED BY THE COMMUNITY

- Carter is interrogated by Schaeffer.
- The Amish community gathers to raise a barn for one of their members. Everyone is involved.
- Book is welcomed for his carpentry skills and works alongside Daniel.
- Rachel and the other women serve food. She is observed by others.
- A friend warns her of the gossip.
- Back home, Book observes Rachel bathing through the window. She turns to him but he looks away.

6. BOOK IS DISCOVERED

- Book explains to Rachel why they did not make love.
- Phoning from town, Book learns that his partner is dead.
- He phones Schaeffer at home and warns him that he knows.
- Locals taunt the Amish and Book defends them physically
- The local mayor raises the alarm with police across the county
- Book and Ely erect the repaired bird house. Rachel realises that Book is leaving.
- That night Rachel goes to Book in the field.

8. THE FINAL SHOW-DOWN

- Early morning, cars are seen driving towards the farm.
- The three men approach the farm. Schaeffer threatens Rachel and Eli warns Book.
- Book sends Samuel running to the nearest farm but he stays near.
- The men get confused in the farm buildings and Fergie gets trapped in the silo.
- Book gets the dead man's gun and kills McFee.
- Schaeffer holds a gun to Rachel's head, Book tells him to put the gun down.
- Samuel rings the bell and others come running.
- Book is held under gunpoint but he persuades Schaeffer to put down his gun.
- Book prepares to return to the city and Rachel is free to enter another relationship.



KEY MOMENTS

KEY MOMENT

FILM LANGUAGE

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

1. Amish funeral (4mins 40 secs)

Social Setting: a religious community; roles for men and women;
 Theme: community, grain/food, gender divide, tradition vs modern;
 General vision & viewpoint: traditional community living;
 Relationships: Rachel & Amish, Rachel & Daniel;

Wide Angle Shot of meadow. Grain blowing gently, the line parallel to the horizon.
 Soundtrack melodious and gentle.

Long shot of people coming from different directions, on foot. All wearing same costume. Subtitle informs us that this is 1984. No dialogue.

Interior, people mourning, speaking German. Long shot of man comforting widow who is surrounded by women.

Groups of people dressed in black come from different directions and walk together to a farm. The sense of community is emphasised by their demeanour and costume. Traditional carriages also drive up. Despite appearances, we learn from the subtitle that it is 1984. Inside, the people mourn one of their members and comfort his widow. They eat food made from the produce of their land. Women and men are segregated. The community speaks its own language, which is not translated for the viewer. The camera follows one man who goes to comfort the widow.

2. Samuel witnesses a murder and they meet Book (4 mins 15 secs)

Social Setting: the city; violence and crime/law enforcement;
 Theme: individual/community; crime & justice; innocence/corruption;
 Literary Genre: turning point: Rachel meets Book; thriller/melodrama;
 General vision & viewpoint: corrupt modern world; a child's view;

Long shot of boy entering toilets. Dim lighting in room. Sound of water as man washes face. No dialogue exchanged between two men who come in. Extreme close-up of Samuel watching through the door.

Extreme close-up of body on ground. Sound of water as murderer washes hands, sound of Samuel's gasps attracts his attention.

Low-angle track up Samuel's body, standing on toilet. Close-up of Book talking to Samuel.

Samuel enters the toilets, curious about every aspect of the strange place. In the dimly-lit toilets, the man who comes in washes his hands. The other two enter but don't speak. This time the silence has a sinister purpose unlike the Amish silence earlier. The brutal murder belongs to the urban world rather than the natural death of Samuel's father. The murderer washes his hands and they leave. The police arrive and matter-of-factly start the investigation, which brings Samuel and Rachel into contact with Book. Book crouches down to engage the boy.

3. At the station: Samuel recognises one of the men involved 3 mins 5 secs)

Social setting: law enforcement & corruption;
 Relationship: Book and Samuel; Book and Rachel;
 Theme: corruption; loyalty; legalised arms/pacifism;
 Literary genre: thriller;

Various people in close-up make contact with Samuel in police station. Tracking shot follows Samuel through room. Close-up of Samuel looking into cabinet. Zoom in on photo in newspaper cutting. Soundtrack underlines the seriousness of his discovery as Book walks in slow motion towards him, Non-verbal exchange as he recognises what Samuel is pointing to. Close-up of Book reveals his reaction to the situation.

Inside the police room, Book – seen at Samuel's eye level – shows Samuel photos of suspects. Samuel wanders around, exploring another new environment. This time, however, people interact with him, including an arrested man and a female police officer. Samuel's recognition of McFee reveals to Book the nature of the crime and the truth about his colleagues. Book is now faced with a choice.

KEY MOMENT

FILM LANGUAGE

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

4. Book recovers on the Amish farm (4 mins 5 secs)

Relationships: Book and Samuel; Book and Rachel; Book and the Amish;
 Theme: modernity/tradition; violence/pacifism; love; hero;
 Social setting: Amish farm; community life;

Book dressed in ill-fitting Amish costume. Mise en scène of Amish kitchen. Gesture of Book towards Rachel with bullets. Exterior, Samuel and Book, Interior silo: different locations of farm. Minimal dialogue between Eli and Book. Colours of Amish home soft and warm, browns & golds;

As the Amish come to terms with Book's presence in their community, so too must he adjust. Returning from town and dressed in Rachel's husband's clothes which she has altered to fit him, he gives her the bullets from his gun. Book wanders naively around this world as Samuel did in the city and the boy helps him find his way. Eli's frostiness towards him indicates his disapproval of the man's presence but he asks Book to help him on the farm. Next morning after milking they eat together.

5. Rachel and Daniel and Book (7 mins)

Relationships: Rachel & Daniel & Book;
 Social Setting: tradition/modern; farmlife;
 Theme: love, courtship; choice;
 Literary genre: melodrama

Long shot of Daniel & Rachel on seat. Extreme long shot of Book. MS of Rachel turned towards Book. Int. barn, night. Close-up of Rachel and Book by car. Sound of radio coming to life. Mise-en-scene Book gestures to Rachel. Two-shot R&B.

Daniel comes to court Rachel but it seems obvious from her attitude that it is one sided. They sit apart on the bench while she observes Book who shifts awkwardly like a child in the distance. Later, she brings lemonade to Book in the attic and watches his sensual drinking, recalling Daniel's careful sipping. At night, Book introduces her to music and dance from his world but Eli stops them. She rejects his reminder of the Amish laws and the risk of being shunned.

6. Barn-raising (7 mins 15 secs)

Social setting: community/individual; gender roles;
 Theme: profession/craft; love; gender roles;
 Relationship: Book and Amish; Book and Rachel;
 General vision & viewpoint: harmonious community living;

Soundtrack as community move through fields. Theme continued throughout day's work. Medium shot of Daniel, Book & Rachel. Wideshot of frame being raised by men of the community. Low angle showing height of barn and men at work. CU of Rachel serving and her reaction.

The community gather to raise a barn for newly-weds. Book joins in and is welcomed by the community for this carpentry skill. Daniel acknowledges this but is also keen to let him know that he should leave their community. Although the day is about raising the barn, it is also about Rachel showing her feelings for Book and the community watch her. The young men admire her while the elders frown and warn her; One of her friends also warns her of gossip.

7. Book defends the Amish and gives himself away (5 mins 35 secs)

Social setting: individual/community; city/country;
 Theme: authenticity/tourism; violence; tradition;
 Relationship: Book and Amish;
 Literary genre: Turning point – Book's identity and location is revealed;

CU of Book on the phone and Schaeffer at home. MS of John and Eli in carriage. Long shot of locals taunting Daniel and others in cart. CU Book's reaction. Tracking shot of Book towards group; Different costume of locals & Amish; MS Eli's reaction;

Book finds out that Carter is dead when he goes into town. He warns Schaeffer then returns to Eli's carriage. On the way, they get stuck as a group of youths are taunting others. The Amish are both a tourist commodity as well as an object of abuse. Book reacts strongly and confronts them, resorting to his old ways to defend the people he has come to respect. In exposing himself, he blows his own cover and is reported to the police.

8. Final shootout (12 mins 50 secs)

Social setting: farmbuildings;
 Rural vs urban;
 Theme: violence; community; corruption; choice;
 Relationship: Book and Amish; Book and police;

LS of car coming over horizon. No dialogue as men enter the farm. LS of Mc Fee being shot against wall. CU of Book's reaction to his own deed; Tracking along corridor of barn. LS of Amish running through field. Soundtrack builds to a climax; CU of Schaeffer. Wideshot of community group;

Violence enters the Amish community. Book uses his wits to try to protect them as the police get confused. One man is killed by grain, which nourishes the family, but ultimately, Book returns to violence to defend the family, using the dead man's gun. Although outnumbered, he is stronger. Traditional ways win as Samuel's bellringing brings the community to their assistance and finally Book makes the peaceful choice.



USEFUL REFERENCES

IRISH FILM INSTITUTE WEBSITE FOR DOWNLOADING NOTES: www.irishfilm.ie

Irish Film Institute
6 Eustace Street
Dublin 2

Telephone: (01) 679 5744
email: info@irishfilm.ie

FILM WEBSITES USEFUL FOR PETER WEIR FILM REVIEWS

www.imdb.com

Internet Movie Database. Enter film title or director's name. Check reviews under Newsgroup and External reviews

www.mrqe.com

This site gives information on internet reviews across a range of websites.

Fan sites that include Peter Weir material:

www.peterweircave.com

www.splicedonline.com/features/weir.html

www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/cossa982.htm

DVD and VHS available to order from IFI Bookshop. Phone (01) 679 5727 to order.

Books

Available from IFI Bookshop. Phone (01) 679 5727 to order.

- 50 Contemporary Filmmakers (*general reference to major filmmakers*)
Editor: Yvonne Tasker
Publisher: Routledge
ISBN: 0415 18974 - 8
- The Films of Peter Weir
Jonathan Rayner
2nd edition
ISBN: 08264 15350
- Film Journals (*available in IFI library*)
 - Film Ireland
 - Sight and Sound
 - Screen International
 - Variety
 - Cineaste
 - Empire