

THE EPOCH TIMES

# ARTS & CULTURE

PUBLIC DOMAIN



Homer depicts Hector as the ideal hero, who shows his softer side. "The Farewell of Hector to Andromache and Astyanax," before 1918, by Karl Friedrich Deckler.

## LITERATURE

## Hector, Achilles, *and* Toxic Masculinity

Homer's 'The Iliad' compares 2 great warriors

WALKER LARSON

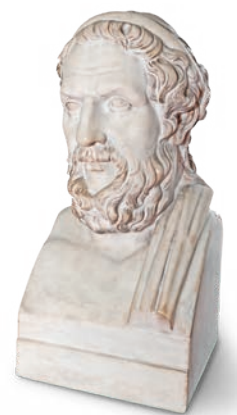
In Homer's poem "The Iliad," the Trojan hero Hector and the Greek hero Achilles are destined for a showdown from the very beginning.

The poem marches with unwavering steps toward this inevitable conclusion, like the marching ranks of Trojan and

Greek soldiers on the blazing plain before Troy. The coming duel between the greatest warriors on each side remains ever-present throughout the seemingly endless struggle of the armies on the beaches before the city, caught between the "hallowed heights of Troy" and the "fish-filled seas," suspended between human civilization and the wild unknown of the afterworld.

Through the story of these two warriors' collision course, Homer presents us with two versions of masculinity. Both men have competitive, aggressive, even violent tendencies. Both men are terrors on the battlefield, for example. But they have very different motives, and so different types of masculinity.

Continued on Page 4



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**Homer presents us with two versions of masculinity.**





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LITERATURE

# 'Is He Dead?': Mark Twain Comes Back to Life

JEFF MINICK

To read a play rather than watch it performed is a bit like eating a beef burrito without the accoutrements of salsa, guacamole, or onions. You get the meat of the thing, but it lacks all flair.

The test of this recipe is simple. Have your teenagers read Shakespeare's "Henry V." Next, have them watch Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film adaptation of the same play. Then pack some diced onions into those food missiles, slather on the guacamole, douse them in salsa, and serve them up when your kids ask for a second run on Branagh's movie.

Plays—tragedy, comedy, farce, and all the rest—are novels, written as a dialogue by the author, the reader, and the imagination. Plays are collaborative works aimed at the stage. The director, the actors, the costume and makeup crews, the sets: These are the people and things that breathe life, color, and magic into a playwright's script. Shakespeare's soliloquies, speeches, and dialogues are the work of a genius, yes, but he wrote them to be performed in front of a live audience.

It was just such an audience—men and women seated in a theater, entranced by the performance of the actors on a stage—that one of America's greatest writers hoped to reach. And time and again, he failed to achieve that ambition.

### Love and Despair

Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835–1910), better known as Mark Twain, loved the theater from boyhood, when he attended the minstrel shows that visited his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri. As an adult, he attended plays whenever possible and at times wrote reviews of them for various papers. He enthusiastically participated in amateur theatricals, and after acquiring fame for books like "Life on the Mississippi" and "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," he became enormously popular for his dramatic and often hilarious monologues and readings.

Yet the man revered by critics and readers as the father of American literature gained no traction as a playwright. Despite repeated attempts, this master of fiction and the essay couldn't ignite the footlights of the stage. One play, "Colonel Sellers," did prove financially lucrative, but Twain was never happy with the production and seemed to agree with his critics that it was "a wretched thing."

And then, in the winter of 1898, Twain wrote a comedy that he was convinced could be "produced simultaneously in London and New York."

### Another Shot at the Stage

"Is He Dead? A Comedy in Three Acts" is the name Twain gave to this work of farce and satire. In her 2003 book by the same title, Twain scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin brings us the script of the play as well as valuable commentary and notes. In her Foreword, she writes of Twain and his family living in 1898 in Vienna, where he wrote "Is He Dead?" Broke after some unwise investments and still grieving the death of his 24-year-old daughter Susy in 1896, Twain spent a dreary autumn in this city before beginning "Is He Dead?"—the writing of which he described as putting him into "immense spirits as soon as my day has started."

If we read just the play, as I did, before we tackle Fishkin's long Afterword, where she examines the play in the context of the 1890s, the possible reasons it was never produced, and its suitability for our own time, we are likely to finish the script unimpressed. In brief, the story line involves a group of artists and others who are in debt to Bastien André, a "picture-dealer and usurer." When André threatens to ruin them all for their failure to pay him, Agamemnon Buckner, a young artist who goes by the nickname "Chicago," hatches a scheme to save his friends. He convinces artist and teacher Jean-François Millet, a character very loosely based on the real-life painter of such works as "The Angelus," to fake his own death, at which point the prices of his paintings skyrocket. André is foiled in all his schemes, and Millet's name becomes a household word across France.

### In Print: Negatives and Positives

For many who read this print version, the play will likely seem unremarkable, creaky, and stilted even for its own time. Twain employs centuries-old dramatic devices to carry the action: a feigned death, a heartless villain out only for money, a young woman torn between true love and saving her family from poverty by marrying that villain, Millet's cross-dressing as he pretends to be his own nonexistent twin sister. There is humor in the dialogue, but as read on the page this will at best bring an occasional chuckle. Finally, Twain populates the stage with so many characters that keeping track of them, especially in the first half of the play, sent me time and again to his "Persons Represented" list.

In his online review at TwainWeb.net, which I read after finishing the script, Mark Dawidziak offers similar negative criticisms. Yet he also points out the value of this piece of writing, which through Fishkin's efforts is now available to the public for the first time. "Is He Dead?" is, after all, by an American master, and it contains examples of Twain's trademark humor and style. "For better or worse," Dawidziak writes, "this is a complete work by Mark Twain, folks, and those don't pull into town on the noon stage every day."

### Twain Meets Broadway

"The play's the thing," said Hamlet, and in the case of "Is He Dead?" those words ring true.

As I noted earlier, words that seem lackluster or clunky in a script can come to life on the stage, given a good director and vibrant actors. In the winter of 2007, nearly five years after Fishkin's book appeared, "Is He Dead?" finally found the audience dreamed of by the author more than a century ago: "Is He Dead?" appeared on Broadway.

In his New York Times review of the play, "It's Not Life on the Mississippi, Jean-François Honey," Ben Brantley first describes Twain's play as "a silly, formulaic farce, written in 1898, about a starving French painter forced to don women's clothes."

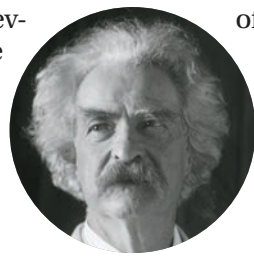
Then he immediately adds, "But with the right doctors, even a long-buried dinosaur can be made to dance." In the case of this dinosaur, these "resurrection artists," as Brantley calls them, include "the director Michael Blakemore, the playwright David Ives (who adapted Twain's script) and an infectiously happy cast, led by the wondrous Norbert Leo Butz, that serves a master class in making a meal out of a profiterole."

Because of this glittering and enthusiastic talent—Brantley is generous in his praise of nearly all on stage—and the tweaking of Twain's script, "jokes you would swear you would never laugh at suddenly seem funny."

If Mark Twain is ensconced in that heaven in which he so often expressed doubt, he must have had a grand laugh that night as well.

### A Summing Up

Even if they've never read his books, most Americans can at least vaguely identify Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer,



Samuel Clemens, better known by his pen name: Mark Twain. Library of Congress.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



Americans can at least vaguely identify Twain's characters, such as Tom Sawyer. Frontispiece from the first edition, 1876, of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" by Mark Twain.



Mark Twain loved the theater and so he wrote a play. "Children Acting the 'Play Scene' from 'Hamlet,' Act II, Scene ii," 1863, by Charles Hunt. Oil on canvas. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Conn.



'IS HE DEAD?' By Mark Twain University of California Press June 2006 Paperback 248 pages

and Becky Thatcher. Many also possess some sort of knowledge, however dim or muddled, of the plots of the books in which these characters appear. We can safely assume, however, that the same will never be said of "Is He Dead?"

Yet the play will retain a place, however minor, in our literature. Scholars will cherish it, especially as so many scenes and devices hark back to earlier pieces by Twain. They might remember, too, that composing this work breathed new life into Twain's moribund writing. In the years remaining before his death, he wrote more short stories and essays, and delivered memorable, witty speeches on numerous occasions.

Finally, this play paints a different picture of Twain in his old age than the one commonly accepted—a cynic who had become disillusioned with mankind. As representative of this viewpoint, which Twain's later writings do indeed reinforce, Fishkin cites Bernard DeVoto, who commented that the older Twain's dark views depicted "man's complete helplessness in the grip of the inexorable forces of the universe, and man's essential cowardice, pettiness and evil."

And yet, as Fishkin rightly observes, the artists portrayed in "Is He Dead?" are "resourceful, boldly inventive, generous, and good." The play and its characters give us "a world in which imagination,

**This play paints a different picture of Twain in his old age than the one commonly accepted.**

chutzpah, and collective action trump malevolence and abusive power." Somewhere in the man from Hannibal there burned, however faintly, a flicker of faith in humanity.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning As I Go" and "Movies Make The Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va.



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THE EPOCH TIMES



## LITERATURE

# Hector, Achilles, and Toxic Masculinity

Continued from Page 1

Often today, strong or aggressive behavior from a man is automatically labeled as “toxic masculinity.” But that blanket moniker fails to make a distinction about the control and usage of such behavior, which “The Iliad” dramatizes very well in its comparison of these two men.

## Achilles’s Rage

The late 8th- or early 7th-century epic poem is set during the Trojan War, but it does not tell the story of the war. We see neither the beginning nor the end of the siege within the lines of “The Iliad.” It is concerned, rather, with a smaller drama within this large drama: the story of the rage of Achilles.

The famous opening lines run: “Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles, / murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses” (Fagles translation). Due to a squabble with the Greek commander Agamemnon, Achilles refuses to fight for most of the poem. And since he is the Greeks’ champion, a veritable death-machine in combat—perhaps the greatest warrior in all of literature and myth—his absence hurts his own side greatly.

Many Greeks die as a result of Achilles’s rage against Agamemnon that keeps him from battle.

For most of the poem, Achilles has no control over himself. He sulks in his tent day by day, consumed by a sizzling, festering anger, believing himself insulted by Agamemnon. The plight of his comrades can’t touch Achilles’s heart, wringed as it is with wrath.

Only the death of someone Achilles personally cares about brings him back into the fight. But even then, he acts with reckless, blind anger, though now it’s directed at his enemies, especially Hector.

Achilles’s aggressive behavior is destructive—to both the Trojans and his own side, the Greeks—because it is selfish and uncontrolled, driven by irrational passion. Upon the death of his friend, Achilles launches himself on a chaotic rampage against the Trojans, unleashing his violent energy in a blind, animalistic manner.

At the end of his rampage, Achilles, bent on getting revenge for the death of his friend, comes face to face with his nemesis, Hector.

Hector shares many of Achilles’s traits but with important differences. Hector, too, is a powerful force in battle, singlehandedly scattering enemy troops. Homer compares him to a powerful west wind and a strong lion.

The Greeks fear him, and with good reason: “Hector harried the long-haired Argives, killing the last stragglers, man after lagging man and they, they fled in panic” (Book VIII). Hector’s forcefulness on the field of battle along with his strong leadership holds the defense of



Hector’s last visit with his wife, Andromache, and infant son, Astyanax, has been a favorite scene for artistic depiction through the ages. Here it appears on an Apulian red-figure vase, 370–360 B.C. The Jatta National Archaeological Museum in Ruvo di Puglia, Italy.

the city together. In Book VI, Homer says that Hector is the “lone defense of Troy.”

## Hector’s Masculinity

But Hector is more than just a ferocious fighter. He has an extraordinarily gentle side, and here is where he differs from Achilles. He is calm and courteous when inside Troy. He even speaks kindly to Helen, who is one of the main causes of his grief, since it was her elopement with Hector’s brother Paris that set off the war.

## True masculinity controls the forceful, dangerous side of male nature.

Most importantly, he is a family man who treats his wife and son with great care. In a famous scene in Book VI, Hector, still bloody and begrimed from battle, still wearing his battered armor and with the fire of combat just fading in his eyes, visits his wife and son. The passage is worth quoting at length:

*She [his wife] joined him now, and following in her steps  
A servant holding the boy against her breast,  
In the first flush of life, only a baby,  
Hector’s son, the darling of his eyes  
and radiant as a star ...  
The great man of war breaking into a broad smile,  
his gaze fixed on his son, in silence ...  
... shining Hector reached down  
for his son. ... And ... laughed,  
[Andromache] laughed as well, and glorious Hector,  
quickly lifting the helmet from his head,  
set it down on the ground, fiery in the sunlight,  
and raising his son he kissed him, tossed*

him in his arms,  
lifting a prayer to Zeus and the other deathless gods ...

*So Hector prayed and placed his son in the arms of his loving wife.  
Andromache pressed the child to her ... smiling through her tears. Her husband noticed,  
and filled with pity now, Hector stroked her gently,  
trying to reassure her.*

Andromache fears that Hector will die, and it’s true that he is at great risk—but it is a risk he takes for her sake, to protect her and their entire city. Here we see that Hector’s ferocity is not blind or rage-induced, like Achilles’s.

It is rational, calculated. Its purpose is simply to defend what he loves. He is in control of his dangerous side and channels it solely for the benefit of others; he would never hurt his own people or family. This is what true masculinity looks like.

True masculinity controls the forceful, dangerous side of male nature to direct it to good and self-sacrificing ends. By contrast, Achilles has not tamed the aggressive side of his male nature, nor does he direct it to the benefit of others. He uses it for himself and the satisfaction of his unchecked emotions.

So what can we learn from this about the modern concept of “toxic masculinity”? One popular definition of the term is: “a cultural concept of manliness that glorifies stoicism, strength, virility, and dominance, and that is socially maladaptive or harmful to mental health.”

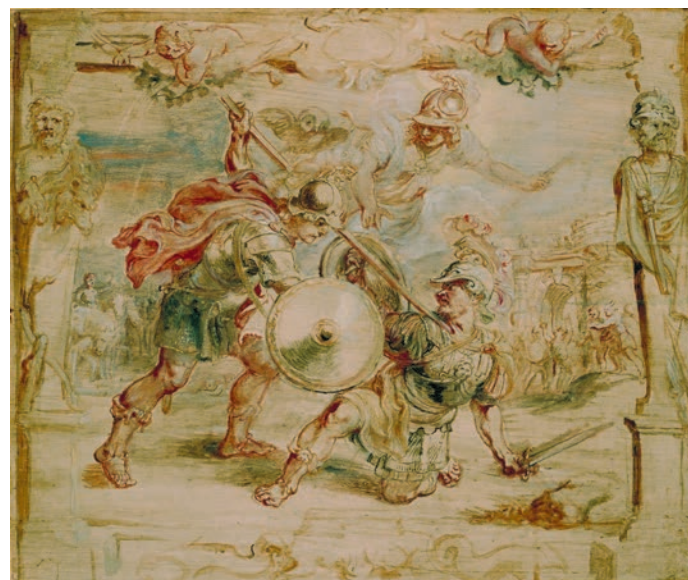
This definition fails to make clear the distinction above, the distinction between a man like Hector and a man like Achilles. It is not the virility, strength, or dominance themselves that are “toxic,” only the way that those traits are used. If men are not virile and strong, they are not fully men, after all.

People who use the term “toxic masculinity” often seem to advocate that men cease to be men—that they surrender strength, virility, and dominance, traits that are part of their very nature.

But that is no solution. In reality, our society needs traits like these for its very preservation. Take the example of Hector. If he lacked these traits, Troy would have fallen much sooner than it did, bringing suffering and misery to his culture.

One can’t help wondering whether the suffering in our society might be less if we possessed more Hectors in our midst.

*Walker Larson teaches literature and history at a private academy in Wisconsin, where he resides with his wife. He holds a Master’s in English literature and language, and his writing has appeared in The Hemingway Review, Intellectual Takeout, and his Substack, TheHazelnut.*



“The Death of Hector,” unfinished oil painting circa 1630–1635, by Peter Paul Rubens. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands.



“The Rage of Achilles,” 1757, by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. A fresco at the Villa Valmarana ai Nani, at Vicenza, Italy.



“The Wrath of Achilles,” circa 1630–1635, by Peter Paul Rubens. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands.



“Achilles Displaying the Body of Hector at the Feet of Patroclus,” 1769, by Jean-Joseph Taillasson. Oil on canvas. Krannert Art Museum.



Silversmith Scott Hardy works on a silver belt buckle.



Master silversmith Scott Hardy in his workshop. Years ago, a master silversmith advised Hardy to gain proficiency in one profession and to honor the materials.

## ART IN PRACTICE

# Keeping Our Creative Dreams Real

Expert advice for mastering art and living well

## LORRAINE FERRIER

In January, many of us plan our year ahead. Each year, I try to make time for two big creative projects, each dictated by the seasons: In spring and summer my fruit and vegetable garden demands my attention, and then in autumn and winter, I focus my time on learning an art or craft. This year it’s dressmaking.

In my mind’s eye, I’ve already created a peaceful garden oasis abuzz with bees, birds, and butterflies, full of juicy fruit and vibrant vegetables. My cupboard is full. There’s no need to go grocery shopping anymore. I’ve similar dressmaking dreams. In my head, I’ve made a perfectly tailored summer dress from raw silk, which swishes in the summer breeze as I skip to my garden heaven.

In reality, my summer dress is still a

pile of blue raw silk, tucked away in the cupboard next to my sewing machine, and last year’s harvest gave me enough for an odd garnish: Some raspberries and a few bunches of salad leaves, to name a couple.

This year, I was focusing on the steps that I need to take to get closer to my creative hopes and dreams, when it dawned on me that the fine artists and craftspeople that I’ve interviewed for The Epoch Times have already blessed me with heaps of advice and guidance about how they became experts in their fields. I’m not aiming for their level of mastery, but when I looked back at a few of their nuggets of advice, I realized that their advice didn’t always apply just to art; some were universal values for living well.

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Saddler Cary Schwarz inspects one of his oak leather saddles in his workshop.



## ART IN PRACTICE

# Keeping Our Creative Dreams Real

Continued from Page 5

## Pick a Profession and Master It

In the 1980s, self-taught silversmith Scott Hardy made spurs and horse jewelry until he met two master silversmiths. Over a drink, they shared their work and advice. Each concentrated on one area of Western craft. One of them said to Hardy: “Pick a profession and become the best you can be at it. You owe that to the materials.”

From that day on, Hardy focused on gold and silversmithing. He made it his mission to read and learn all he could about the methods and materials of his trades.

Hardy likens learning to climbing one part of a mountain and then reaching a lush meadow, where one can choose to rest after conquering a skill or choose to keep improving one’s skills to reach higher levels. Hardy always chooses to climb. Now, with over 41 years of working at perfecting his trade, he takes smaller steps, but they’re no less significant.

## Start Small to Become Great

Saddler Cary Schwarz advises any aspiring craftsperson to start small. Some of his students set their expectations high due to what they’ve seen on YouTube video tutorials and social media channels that show craftspeople making exquisitely crafted objects. But these omit the hundreds of hours of practice that each skilled craftsperson has undergone to be proficient.

Students want to start their saddle-making journey at second or third base, when what they need to do is to take a process-oriented approach and reach first base first, he said. He tells his students to first become acquainted with the leather and understand how it feels to work with it.

## Know Your Materials Well

George O’Hanlon encourages professional painters to make their own paint, or at least know how to. As the director of Natural Pigments, a U.S. company that manufactures rare and hard-to-find fine arts materials, O’Hanlon says that a lot of artists today don’t understand paint; they rely on commercial paint from a tube.

O’Hanlon sees this as a major disadvantage for them. He likens those artists to chefs picking up a couple of jars of sauce and some ingredients at the supermarket to make a meal. They’re not cooking a meal; they’re assembling it. “Imagine a chef not knowing how to prepare a sauce from scratch, or how to prepare a dish from the basic ingredients,” he said.

Artists today aren’t experimenting in paint making, as they did in the past, because they haven’t learned how to make paint at college, and they can’t readily access the paint-making materials.

O’Hanlon promotes using the simplest of paint formulas, and then artists can see how elements interact with each other. When they know each element in their paint—because they’ve made it themselves—they have more control over the painting process.

## Be Disciplined and Put in the Hours

Still-life painter Susan Paterson believes that budding artists are often unaware of the amount of work and discipline it takes to produce such detailed art as hers. “People think you have to be inspired to go up there to your studio and paint, but I do treat it like a job,” she said. For Paterson, that means working six to seven hours a day, Monday through Friday.

Sometimes a painting can take three to four months to complete, so she normally works on two or three paintings at a time while the oil paint slowly dries. Sometimes she’s even had to polish a silver piece in her arrangement, and more often has had to dust the pieces as the dust settles on them over time.

She can spend 35 to 50 hours on the drawing alone to get every aspect of the composition accurate before her paintbrush connects to paint and panel. Some of Paterson’s larger paintings can take 200 hours to create.

## Take Time to Reflect and See Your Progress

Mixed media artist Susannah Weiland loves how embroidering by hand sets its own pace. There’s no way of doing it fast. She embroiders in stages, laboring long and hard at each motif.

She enjoys the slow, intensive process but needs sanity breaks to stop, reflect, and rest her eyes. “It’s good to take a break and then come back to it, and then you notice things that you want to change or you want to add in,” she said.

Weiland often photographs her work at the



Susan Paterson meticulously creates her still-life paintings, sometimes spending 35 to 50 hours on the drawing alone. She’s pictured here in her studio painting “Eggs With Lace Tablecloth.” Oil on panel; 12 inches by 18 inches.



Mixed media artist Susannah Weiland hand embroiders one of her pencil drawings. Weiland often photographs her work at the start and end of each day to see her progress.



“July Sky,” 2022, by Susannah Weiland. Hand embroidery into leather; 10 5/8 inches by 11 1/4 inches.

beginning and end of her day since, working at a slow pace and on such a small scale, she can easily lose sight of her progress.

## Follow in the Footsteps of Those You Admire, but Pave Your Own Path

Representational painter Kristen Yann’s college education fell far short of her hope to learn traditional painting techniques. “It was just very poor training as far as technique goes, and a heavy emphasis on how to think,” she said.

The one golden nugget of advice that she got from college was to look at the websites and résumés of artists whom she admired and see where they trained. One of Yann’s favorite living artists, Alex J. Venezia, had also been to a university but ended up training at East Oaks Studio in Raleigh, North Carolina.

East Oaks Studio, she explained, is not an instructional program. It’s a community of artists who paint together, share information, and critique each other’s work.

Yann won an East Oaks Studio scholarship. She spent long periods of time watching East Oaks Studio co-founder Louis Carr and resident artist Venezia paint. “I learned from observation, and that’s a really wonderful thing because you don’t get a lot of this ‘head’ knowledge blocking your intuition” when you’re painting, she said.

She believes that observing artists at work far exceeds reading about techniques because you can see art in practice. You see how the artists put their brushes to the pal-

ette, how much paint they pick up on their brushes, how they mix their paints, and even how they hold their brushes.

### Observing artists at work far exceeds reading about techniques because you can see art in practice.

## Always Remember Your Why

Icon carver Jonathan Pageau first started carving in his spare time because it was something he loved doing. When his bishop saw him carving, he asked Pageau to make him a panagia, the pendant featuring the Virgin Mary with the Christ child that Eastern Orthodox bishops wear when giving the Divine Liturgy.

Pageau had never made a miniature before, so he contacted a Serbian carver who guided him through the process, which took several days. Pageau laughed when he said, “He was ruthless with me. It was wonderful.”

Finally, when he felt he’d done his best, he gave the pendant to his bishop after the liturgy. He’d become so lost in the process of perfecting the carving that he’d momentarily lost track of its significance. But his bishop’s reaction woke him up. As his bishop unwrapped the pendant he made a gesture of reverence, crossing himself and bowing slightly. Pageau was taken aback. “My bishop wasn’t seeing my artwork at that moment. ... He was seeing the Virgin,” he said.

It was all Pageau had hoped for. He realized that his bishop would wear the object he’d made and that it would follow the bishop through his spiritual life, including his church services.

# Paperback Page-Turner Masquerading as Classic Literary Novel

## MARK JACKSON

Murder mysteries such as “The Name of the Rose,” “Murder on the Orient Express,” or “Death on the Nile” are usually situated in well-defined, cordoned-off communities. It’s then up to the intruding outsider—the detective—to sniff out the intrigue and connections, until he manages to get hold of a loose strand of yarn and unravels the sweater of secrecy shrouding said community in untruths.

Based on a novel by Louis Bayard, director Scott Cooper’s “The Pale Blue Eye” sets the mystery at a wintry West Point Military Academy in 1830. The somber dreariness—from the misty woods to the overhanging cliffs and quiet, trickling waters—is Gothic. And yet, paradoxically, while snowy almost to the point of being shot in black and white, with its night scenes lit by candles, fireplaces, and lanterns, the setting has an atmosphere bordering on coziness.

## The Murder

A West Point cadet has been found hanged, and a highly decorated police detective (Christian Bale) who lives not far hence, is reluctantly called out of retirement for the case. And soon the cat-and-mouse game is on.

Bale plays detective Augustus Landor, a recent widower, with the heavily mustachioed beardfulness and weary doggedness he employs in all his 1800s roles. The pervasive melancholy in this case stems from the life of seclusion that he’s been living since the disappearance of his beloved teenage daughter Mattie (Hadley Robinson).

Landor is the gruff but reliable detective. He’s charmless, gloomy, tactless, jaded, and harbors grudges against the military institution that he’s been requested to assist. He’s opposed to the way the curriculum takes students apart before building them back up again—and has no problem voicing his opinions.

Academy Superintendent Col. Sylvanus Thayer (Timothy Spall) informs detective Landor that the cadet’s body was desecrated, and local coroner Dr. Marquis (Toby Jones) leads us through the grisly visuals whereby it’s revealed that the victim’s



SCOTT GARFIELD/NETFLIX

heart was cut out. A scrap of paper bearing the remnants of a cryptic message is left in his hand (revealed after the good detective, accompanied by gruesome sound effects, overpowers the rigor mortis of the corpse’s closed fist. Lovely. But effective).

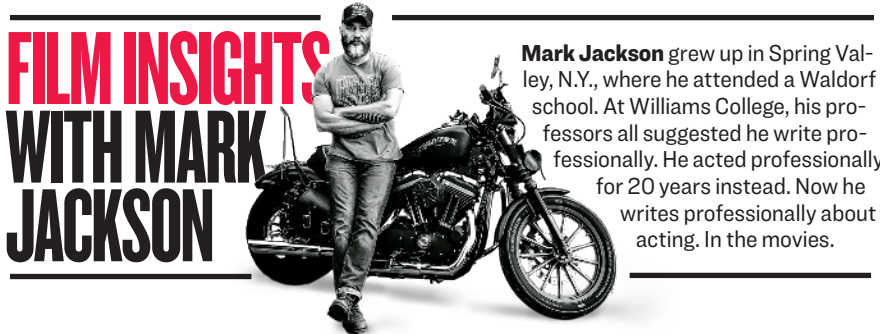
## Sniffing Out the Evil Doers

Landor’s much willier than the stuffy, by-the-book, ramrod West Point staffers Capt. Hitchcock (Simon McBurney) and the superintendent, who’ve requested his services. They demand quick answers because the honor of the academy is at stake during congressional hearings, which adds greater tension to the proceedings.

Landor is also impressed by the depth of perception demonstrated by one of the victim’s classmates, the rather eccentric Cadet Fourth Classman E.A. Poe. That would be one Edgar Allan Poe (played by Harry Melling; best known to date as Harry Potter’s chubby spoiled cousin, Dudley Dursley).

Poet Poe was, in fact, a West Point cadet, matriculating in March 1830, but it’s dubious as to whether the historical fellow was as over-the-top and campy as Melling’s portrayal. My guess would be absolutely not. This almost veers the film toward a Poe origin story but ends up having more of a Sherlock Holmes trajectory, with Melling’s portrayal of Poe as an overly enthusiastic junior Watson to detective Landor’s dour, upper Hudson Valley Holmes.

Landor “deputizes” Poe, and the mys-



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

tery soon deepens when another body is discovered. And another. And some desecrated sheep and goats into the bargain, all of which, of course, add up to many red herrings.

Landor also confides in Patsy, a barmaid (Charlotte Gainsbourg), his love interest, and confidante. Local occult scholar and authority Jean-Pepe (Robert Duvall) explains that the organ removal from the victims’ bodies is likely due to Satanic ritual. Dr. Marquis’s wife (Gillian Anderson) has such a passive-aggressive, invasive, under-the-radar shaming manner that it makes you lift an eyebrow as to what lurks behind such a demeanor. And young Poe’s budding romance with the Marquises’ daughter, the enigmatic Lea Marquis (Lucy Boynton), renders a few more breadcrumb clues.

Landor, while claiming to be a hellhound on the trail of truth, clearly has some tricks and ulterior motives up his sleeves.

## An Enthralling Tale

“The Pale Blue Eye” is a plodding but engrossing watch. While mega-A-lister Bale can chew the scenery with the best of them, he generously allows himself to be upstaged by Melling’s molasses-thick, Richmond, Virginia-drawing Poe, with his scary-doll, wide-eyed, and wildly gesticulated orations.

Melling very much physically resembles Poe here, whether or not the puppyish version of the famous American writer is an appropriate actor choice. Between Bale and Melling, it’s a showdown of brooding charisma versus flamboyant hamming.

The film supplies many false conclusions and misleading accusations and coincidences. As the mystery deepens, it’s possible to guess where it’s all headed and who the killer is, but only if you keep a very sharp lookout for the fleeting clues. It’s a pulpy paperback mystery masquerading as a leather-bound classic literary novel—one written by, say, (as the humorously disdainful Poe puts it) “the deplorable Fenimore Cooper”—and therefore much more fun than one might think.

“The Pale Blue Eye” began streaming on Netflix, Jan. 6.

## ‘The Pale Blue Eye’

Director: Scott Cooper

Starring: Christian Bale, Harry Melling, Timothy Spall, Simon McBurney, Robert Duvall, Toby Jones, Gillian Anderson, Lucy Boynton, Hadley Robinson

MPAA Rating: R

Running Time: 2 hours, 8 minutes

Release Date: Jan. 6, 2023

★★★★☆

## FILM REVIEW

# The Older and Younger Downey Bare Their Souls

## MICHAEL CLARK

Robert Downey Sr. and Jr. are one of the very few parent-child combinations working in the arts where the younger ended up becoming far more successful and well-known than the elder. In the documentary “Sr.,” father and son refer to (and address) each other as “Sr.” and “Jr.,” which shows that Jr. is keenly aware that he probably wouldn’t be where he is without having a (semi) famous parent. Conversely, Sr. couldn’t be prouder or happier that his son eclipsed him professionally.

The immense bond between the two men displayed throughout the film only strengthens as it progresses. And it offers up a situation that all of us would love to have if we only had the free time and funds to do so.

Jr. conceived the premise of the movie in 2019, not long after Sr. was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. As someone who lost a parent to this especially cruel ailment, I can state that it has no expiration or end date. For my mom, it was 20 years; for Sr., it was far less.

Wisely, Jr. didn’t attempt to direct “Sr.” Instead, he hired his friend Chris Smith, a guy who has cranked out one superb, low-budget, high-concept film after another, largely escaping the notice of the masses, much in the same manner as Sr. did decades earlier.

From 1961 through 2005, Sr. directed 18 films, none of which most mainstream movie fans would likely recognize, although one of them, “Putney Swope” (1969), was selected in 2016 to be added to the United States Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”

That’s not an achievement to be taken lightly. Very few films make this particular grade.

## Offbeat and Quirky

“Sr.” plays out like, well, most of Sr.’s movies. Shot in gorgeous black and white, the movie (which recently won the prestigious National Board of Review Award for Best Documentary Feature) initially doesn’t appear to have any type of set narrative in mind.

The first 10 minutes—the most crucial in any movie—are presented as seemingly random, haphazard, repetitive, and lacking context. Given that the finished product is only 90 minutes long, this seems like a dangerous waste of time.

The bulk of Sr.’s output consisted of guerrilla, avant-garde affairs without any type of traditional form or structure, something that Smith (and certainly in tandem with Jr.) wished to underscore and accent. The film is all about the father (hence the title) and very little about the son. Furthermore, no movie starring Jr. (released after the late 1980s is even mentioned. (Take that, Marvel fans!))

Once the movie shifts into proper gear, the rewards to the viewer start piling up. Smith mixes clips from Sr.’s back catalog with interviews of his frequently used actors, and commentary from those beginning their careers at around the same time (Norman Lear, Alan Arkin, Larry Wolf). He also includes visiting old set locations, all of them in New York.

One of the movie’s many highlights is the lengthy commentary from filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson (“There Will Be Blood,” “Licorice Pizza”), who cites Sr. as a major influence, and had cast him as a recording studio owner in “Boogie Nights.”

## Refreshingly Honest

The production reaches its high-water narrative mark at about the midway point, when father and son address their past chemical addiction issues.

Beginning in 1970 when Jr. made his acting debut at the age of 5 in his father’s film “Pound,” he became a fixture on future sets where drug and alcohol use was rampant. Not only did Sr. and his first wife (also Jr.’s mother), Elsie Ann Ford, fail to shield their son from these substances,

It’s refreshing to witness famous family members being thoroughly transparent and honest.

## ‘Sr.’

Documentary

Director: Chris Smith

Running Time: 1 hour, 29 minutes

MPAA Rating: R

Release Date: Dec. 2, 2022

★★★★☆



Robert Downey Sr. (L) and Robert Downey Jr. discuss their relationship in “Sr.”

they also gave them to him.

After a promising stretch in the 1980s and 1990s, Jr.’s demons got the best of him; his career went into a tailspin. He spent the final five years of the 20th century either in rehab or in jail on a multitude of charges.

While Jr. states that this would have happened with or without his parents’ prompting, Sr. is still certain that he was the cause and never forgave himself for it.

Documenting all of this soul-bearing in front of cameras for posterity’s sake is obviously cathartic and cleansing for both men, but it feels more than a tad calculating. On the other hand, it’s refreshing to witness famous family members being thoroughly transparent and honest while refusing to verbally attack each other.

In many ways, “Sr.” follows the same blueprint of many of his films: Start with an idea and just see where it goes. It’s a novel way to approach a documentary, and it’s easy to understand why it is winning so many people over. But for those who prefer order and focus, it plays out in a disjointed way and is not fully realized.

Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has provided film content to over 30 print and online media outlets. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a weekly contributor to the Shamon Burke Show on FloridaManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles. He favors dark comedy, thrillers, and documentaries.



ILLUSTRIOUS IDEAS AND ILLUSTRATIONS: THE IMAGERY OF GUSTAV DORÉ

# Lies Masquerading as Truth: Milton's Satan Heads to Earth

ERIC BESS

In the last part of our extensive series “Illustrious Ideas and Illustrations: The Imagery of Gustav Doré,” we saw Satan confront his children, Sin and Death, at the gates of hell as told by John Milton in his epic poem “Paradise Lost.” Sin and Death agree to let Satan pass out of the gates of hell, and Satan continues his journey to find God’s new creation: Earth.

## God, Satan, and the Future of Humans

As Milton’s “Paradise Lost” continues, God watches Satan from heaven and makes the point that he knows Satan will tempt human beings. He explains the immensity of Satan’s evil by suggesting that Satan came to hate him from within Satan himself. The humans that Satan will tempt, however, should be shown grace because they do not hate God from within themselves but will be tempted to resist God because of Satan’s efforts.

God asks the other beings in heaven: Who will sacrifice themselves for the eternal life of humans? Only Jesus, God’s son, comes forth. God praises Jesus’s love and compassion.

## Satan is successful because he is a master of hypocrisy.

### Satan’s Flight to Earth

Meanwhile, Satan is flying aimlessly looking for Earth until he finds one of the seven archangels, Uriel, who is thinking deeply about something out in the distance. He knows Uriel will condemn him if he approaches him in his true form, so Satan decides to change forms in order to deceive Uriel:

“Glad was the Spirit impure; as now in hope To find who might direct his wand’ring flight To Paradise the happy seat of man, His journey’s end and our beginning woe. But first he casts to change his proper shape ... And now a stripling Cherub he appears.” (Book III, Lines 631–634, 636).

Disguised as a cherub, Satan approaches Uriel and asks him where he can find Earth, so he can praise God for his new creation. Uriel tells the deceitful one how God created Earth and where it is located:

“I saw when at his word the formless mass, This world’s material mould, came to a heap:

Confusion heard his voice, and wild uproar Stood ruled, stood vast infinitude confined; Till at his second bidding darkness fled, Light shone, and order from disorder sprung ...

Look downward on that globe whose hither side With light from hence, though but reflected, shines; That place is earth the seat of man...” (Book III, Lines 708–713, 722–724).

### Doré’s Use of Contrast

Doré’s illustration shows the dark figure



PUBLIC DOMAIN

“Towards the coast of Earth beneath,/ Down from the ecliptic, sped with hoped success,/ Throws his steep flight in many an airy wheel,” (Ill. 739–741), 1866, an engraving by Gustav Doré for John Milton’s epic poem “Paradise Lost.”

of Satan heading toward Earth, which is illuminated by a light shining from the heavens. This light reiterates the point that, despite Satan’s efforts, Earth and its inhabitants are created by God, and their nature is divine.

Clouds cover Earth except in the area where the light of heaven shines. Maybe the clouds are symbolic of confusion and chaos. Does this suggest that heaven is responsible for clarifying confusion and ordering chaos? Milton does have Uriel say that God’s voice dismantled confusion with rules, and that God ordered disorder.

We can associate confusion and chaos with the opposite of truth, since we can presume that, by its definition, truth is clear and ordered. If this is the case, then Doré’s depiction is more nuanced than it may initially seem. What Doré may be illustrating is the contrast between truth and deception.

Milton tells of Satan’s deceptive ways as Satan turns into a cherub to trick Uriel. Un-

like the truth—which in its purest form is always true—not only does Satan change appearances multiple times (as we will see later), but what he represents shifts as well. As we move through the series, for example, Satan’s nature seems to change from one evil to the next. First, it was pride, then power, and vanity. Now, his nature is deception.

Thus, Doré’s depiction of a dark Satan may align with Satan’s nature as something that seeks to obscure the truth. In other words, Satan represents the opposite of truth. Milton makes it clear that even the righteous among us can be deceived by lies. Uriel, an archangel within view of God’s throne, was deceived by Satan, for according to Milton:

“neither man nor angel can discern Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks Invisible, except to God alone.” (Book III, Lines 682–684)

Satan is successful because he is a master of

hypocrisy. He can pretend to be righteous in order to destroy what is righteous.

Milton also clearly contrasts what he believes to be the characteristic difference between God and Satan. God is the truth of self-sacrifice for the sake of love, and Satan is the falseness that seeks to destroy truth for the sake of pride.

In a world filled with deception and lies, where the immoral masquerades as the righteous, how might we discern what is really true and bound in compassionate love?

*Gustav Doré was a prolific illustrator of the 19th century. He created images for some of the greatest classical literature of the Western world, including The Bible, “Paradise Lost,” and “The Divine Comedy.” In this series, we will take a deep dive into the thoughts that inspired Doré and the imagery those thoughts provoked. For the first article in the series, visit “Illustrious Ideas and Illustrations: The Imagery of Gustav Doré.”*

## BOOK REVIEW

# Raising Arms Against Royalty

PUBLIC DOMAIN



“Battle of Marston Moor, 1644” by John Barton. The book reveals the surprising horror of the English Civil War.

## ANITA L. SHERMAN

Following the death of his mother, Elizabeth II, in September 2022, Charles III became king of the United Kingdom and the 14 other Commonwealth realms. At age 73, he became the oldest person to accede to the British throne, being the longest-serving heir apparent.

England retains its royalty, as do several other countries. As of 2022, there were 43 sovereign states in the world with a monarch as head of state.

Author Jessie Childs in her latest historical narrative, “The Siege of Loyalty House: A Story of the English Civil War,” takes readers to another time and era in England when royalty reigned: Charles I—who ruled under the belief that his reign was divinely inspired—in the timeframe of the mid-1600s.

Not all of Charles’s actions were thought of as benevolent. In fact, continual conflict with Parliament, the levying of harsh taxes, and his unpopularity with many of his subjects led to the civil war that is the focus of this meticulously researched and engaging read. It is a work of keen scholarship, which

recounts in vivid detail a particularly brutal period in England’s history. It’s also a compassionate and poignant look at the myriad men, women, and children whose futures were forever changed by the political climate that was impossible to escape.

### Roundheads and Royals

Childs deftly sets the stage, giving readers close-up looks into the lives of local merchants as well as career politicians: their daily interactions, areas of interest, aspirations, lineages and heritages, beliefs, and loyalties. Ultimately, it’s those loyalties that divided neighbors and families and pitted friend against friend and brother against brother.

It was a devastating time in England. Chaos reigned with the parliamentary Roundheads pitted against the Royalists. Basing House, known as Loyalty House, in Hampshire, was the stronghold of the marquess of Winchester. Ever loyal to King Charles I, he was besieged three times between 1643 and 1645. This is the story of those events.

Readers will find themselves immensely engrossed while learning about Thomas Johnson, an herbalist and member of the



Wang Lung (Paul Muni) and O-Lan (Luise Rainer) face the struggles of both hardship and prosperity as landowners, in “The Good Earth.”



Roland Lui Got (Younger Son), who is a Chinese American actor, and Luise Rainer (O-Lan), a Caucasian actress cast as the mother in “The Good Earth,” illustrate the challenges of miscegenetic casting and censorship in 1930s Hollywood.

## GOLDEN ERA FILMS

# Chinese New Year from Old Hollywood

## ‘The Good Earth’ From 1937

### TIFFANY BRANNAN

“The soul of a great nation is expressed in the life of its humblest people. In this simple story of a Chinese farmer may be found something of the soul of China—its humility, its courage, its deep heritage from the past, and its vast promise for the future.”

So begins “The Good Earth,” the 1937 Academy Award-winning Hollywood adaptation of Pearl S. Buck’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name. Chinese New Year is on Jan. 22 this year, earlier than usual. What classic movie is more appropriate for ringing in the Year of the Rabbit than this story of a simple Chinese farmer’s quest to obtain and hold on to land in order to sustain his growing family?

### A Story of China

The story begins on the day when Wang Lung (Paul Muni) is to be married. He is a poor farmer, so his bride is a kitchen slave from the Great House. The innocent young man is nervous and excited when he gets his unknown bride, O-Lan (Luise Rainer), a quiet but hardworking woman who was sold into slavery when her farmer parents faced famine. She plants a peach pit on Lung’s land the day they marry.

O-Lan works hard to care for her husband and his elderly father (Charley Grapewin), who surprise her by not showing her the cruelty she faced as a slave. Eventually, she bears him children, two sons and a daughter. Lung buys more land with the money he makes from successful harvests, and he eventually has five fields.

A few years later, famine strikes as a drought dries up all the crops. Farmers are forced to sell their land, kill their oxen, and sell their daughters into slavery just to get enough food for their families to survive. However, Wang Lung refuses to sell his land, since he knows that someday the famine will end and that it will be worth something again. His wife encourages him to keep the fields, even when his lazy uncle (Walter Connolly) is pressuring him to sell so that Lung can support his slothful lifestyle. The couple end up taking a train south to find work and food until the famine passes.

In the big city, they beg, steal, and work demeaning jobs to get a little food and shelter. When a revolution plagues the city into chaos, O-Lan joins a mob looting a man-

sion, and she finds a bag of jewels. With this newfound wealth, they are able to return to the north and make their land profitable again, as the rain comes. However, as Wang Lung becomes a rich man, he is faced with the temptations that wealth brings, such as another woman (Tilly Losch), lavish possessions, and trying to live like a lord.

### East Meets West

During the Golden Era of Hollywood, the American film industry was dominated by U.S.-born people of European descent. Thus, Caucasian actors played most prominent roles, donning makeup, hairstyles, and costumes to appear as other ethnicities. “The Good Earth” is an example of this practice, with the main characters being Chinese but played by white actors in “yellowface” makeup.

The fact that Asian actors were not cast in these roles is now controversial. Many modern critics consider the use of white performers in yellowface disrespectful and even racist. Although this practice was common at the time, casting Caucasian performers was not the original intention. According to the American Film Institute, producer Irving Thalberg originally wanted to use only Chinese actors and even considered filming the movie on location in China. The first idea didn’t work out because there weren’t enough Chinese actors in the American film industry. The second idea was ultimately abandoned because of the political climate in China at the time, since the Chinese authorities wanted to dictate how the movie was made.

Nevertheless, even back in the United States, “The Good Earth” was affected by current politics in the Far East. Because of the Sino-Japanese conflict, the Chinese authorities threatened to boycott the movie if any Japanese actors were cast.

Many people hold the Production Code Administration (PCA) responsible for the perceived racial injustice in the casting of this movie. Anna May Wong, one of the main Chinese actresses in 1930s Hollywood, was tested for the role of O-Lan, but she was offered the role of Lotus. Not wanting to play the antagonist while Caucasian actors played sympathetic characters, she turned it down. However, the PCA’s job was to enforce the moral content guidelines of the Motion Picture Production Code, commonly called the



ALL PHOTOS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

## Luise Rainer’s great performance as the hardworking Chinese wife earned her an Academy Award for Best Actress.

For more arts and culture articles, visit [TheEpochTimes.com](https://www.theepochtimes.com)

### ‘The Good Earth’

**Director:** Sidney Franklin  
**Starring:** Paul Muni, Luise Rainer, Walter Connolly, Tilly Losch  
**Running Time:** 2 hours, 18 minutes  
**Not Rated**  
**Release Date:** Aug. 6, 1937  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Hays Code, not to dictate casting decisions—that was the business of the studio.

A clause in the Code did forbid miscegenation, specifically between white and black people, but this was added after the document’s original composition. It was added for the same reason that the filmmakers of “The Good Earth” decided to cast both leading characters as white actors in yellowface, rather than one Caucasian performer and one Asian performer. Many censor boards were against miscegenation, since there still were laws against white and Asian mixed marriages in the 1930s. The PCA’s main job was to help movies avoid censorship, so it usually recommended the elimination of miscegenetic relationships in films. When it came to casting actors of different races as a couple of the same race, filmmakers were allowed to use their own discretion.

While we don’t expect films from the Golden Era of Hollywood (1930s–1950s) to match modern entertainment standards, seeing actors in yellowface is hard for modern viewers. Although some performers can be believable, it can be awkward to watch famous Caucasian actors in Chinese or Japanese makeup and hairstyles. Luise Rainer, however, is one of the most convincing actors in yellowface, and her great performance as the hardworking Chinese wife earned her an Academy Award for Best Actress. In fact, all the actors in “The Good Earth” embody their characters so effectively that viewers quickly get drawn into the story and begin to believe that the actors really are these people.

This Chinese New Year, why not enjoy this Hollywood classic? With an ever-changing story, over 1,500 extras, and amazingly clear footage of a locust swarm, it’s an amazing piece of cinematic history. The story also reminds us of universal truths, which are just as true today as they were 86 years ago. Money is worthless if it comes at the expense of your ideals. Property is the greatest form of wealth a man can own. Above all, it’s better to be nearly starving in a simple shack with a family of people you love than to be living a vain, selfish, lonely life in a mansion.

*Tiffany Brannan is a 21-year-old opera singer, Hollywood historian, interviewer, copywriter, fashion historian, travel writer, and vintage lifestyle enthusiast. In 2016, she and her sister founded the Pure Entertainment Preservation Society, an organization dedicated to reforming the arts by reinstating the Motion Picture Production Code.*

O-Lan (Luise Rainer) and Wang Lung (Paul Muni) are hardworking Chinese farmers who struggle to survive a drought, in “The Good Earth.”

## Terrifying Tools and New Rules

The descriptions of the weaponry used in that period is an eye-opener for the uninitiated in warfare history. There were cannonballs of immense size. Not only did they shatter buildings and lives, but the deafening noise shattered eardrums and spirits. “Granados,” basically a very large grenade filled with any number of items to cause distress and damage, tragically surprised many. And the list goes on.

Rules and roles changed. Hunters and gamekeepers became snipers. England’s foremost architect, Inigo Jones, designed fortifications rather than banquet halls, and women melted lead to make bullets and hurled bricks at their enemies. They were also slaughtered mercilessly along with their children. But there are heroines as well, such as Honora, the marchioness of Winchester, who at one point stealthily left Loyalty House to rally support.

Throughout this history, readers will meet artists, poets, writers, biographers, and tradesmen in addition to the rank and file of both fighting armies. All of their stories are worth knowing and sharing. They are the pivotal players in this beautifully writ-

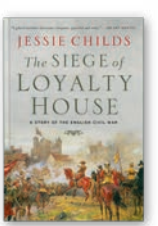
## Childs brings this pivotal and powerful period of England’s history to life in dazzling fashion with inviting prose, insight, grace, and masterful craftsmanship and perspective.

ten epic that, even if you know the ultimate outcome from a past history class, will keep you turning the pages.

Childs brings this pivotal and powerful period of England’s history to life in dazzling fashion with inviting prose, insight, grace, and masterful craftsmanship and perspective. The story is often brutal and bloody, the players desperate and determined, but the telling is always riveting.

History lovers will relish not only its facts but also the depth of human frailties and heroism revealed. Courage and cowardice share common ground in this conflict. Readers will feel more than the drum of advancing foot soldiers or the volley of canons. The human heartbeat will ring louder.

*Anita L. Sherman is an award-winning journalist who has more than 20 years of experience as a writer and editor for local papers and regional publications in Virginia. She now works as a freelance writer and is working on her first novel. She is the mother of three grown children and grandmother to four, and she resides in Warrenton, Va. She can be reached at [anitajustwrite@gmail.com](mailto:anitajustwrite@gmail.com)*



“THE SIEGE OF LOYALTY HOUSE: A STORY OF THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR” By Jessie Childs Pegasus Books Jan. 3, 2023 Hardcover 352 pages



## FILMS

# Why Previews Spoil Too Many Movies

MICHAEL CLARK

While attending a party last year, I was introduced to some friends of a friend who were quite interested in engaging me in conversation.

"We understand you're a movie critic," said the husband, smiling.

"Yes," I said, "for over 25 years now." After a long silent pause, I followed up with, "Are you and your wife big movie fans?"

She replied, "Yes, very much so. We're just not big fans of critics."

Not exactly your usual getting-to-know-you chitchat, but as they were both being semi-cordial, I tried to engage them further by mirroring their directness and asked, "What exactly is it you don't like about critics?"

In what seemed like a prepared statement, they returned in unison: "You people give away too much in the reviews."

As this wasn't the first time I'd heard this, I asked them if they had ever read any of my reviews. She retorted, "No, we live in Virginia; we're just visiting."

I then asked if I could email links to some of my reviews, and they agreed. About a month later, I received a lovely note thanking me for the links and saying they would now be regular readers.

I extended my thanks and asked one more question: "Are you all fans of trailers?" The reply: "Of course! That's how we determine what to see next."

## The Trailer Industry

My new friends share the same feelings regarding both critics and movie trailers as about 95 percent of people who regularly watch films. And, while I was able to change their opinion of the former, getting them to stop using the one tool they employ in deciding how to spend their entertainment money would be a lost cause.

Once an industry afterthought (hence the word), trailers are almost as old as the movie industry itself. Tagged on to the end reel of features, they advertised upcoming titles to captive audiences. But soon the studios realized that most people (as they still do now) leave the theater as soon as the end credits start, and although the

name stuck, trailers were made permanent opening acts.

For the next half-century, theaters spent about 10 minutes before the start of a movie with a cartoon short, a few 30-second trailers, and maybe a newsreel. By the mid-1970s, it was clear that not many people cared for cartoons, newsreels had vanished, and the studios reconsidered the massive power of trailers. You throw together some select bits from the finished film, perhaps toss in some stirring music and maybe a "voice of God" narrator—and, boom, you're ready to go!

The arrival of "Alien" in 1979 marked a turning point for trailers. Containing no dialogue from the film or voice-over, it started slowly with 60 seconds of still images, graphics, and eerie ambient music, leading into a steady build to a frantic conclusion, capped with the text: "In space no one can hear you scream." No spoilers, no plot overexplaining, and sporting one of the best tag lines ever conceived. It was and remains the perfect cinematic tease.

With science fiction, horror, action-adventure, and comedy ruling the industry since the 1980s, the trailer business has become its own cottage industry. Usually clocking in at 2 minutes, 30 seconds, the average cost of trailers is now \$200,000 with most blockbuster "tent pole" titles regularly exceeding \$1 million.

You'd think that's a lot for making something so short with already-shot footage. But that's not always the case, and this is why some of us detest trailers and avoid watching them whenever possible.

## Ignore 'Em

Some trailers include scenes that are not in the movie being advertised, which—no matter how you slice it—is blatant bait-and-switch. Many trailers often make movies seem funnier than they actually are by including every last drop of real or perceived humor. This is particularly prevalent in standard 30-second TV spots. Thirty seconds of laughs spread out over 90 minutes or more is not a desirable ratio.

I became increasingly frustrated with trailers a few years back and challenged myself to write a standard review based



(L-R) Kane (John Hurt), Captain Dallas (Tom Skerritt), and the ship's navigator Lambert (Veronica Cartwright), in a scene from "Alien," the trailer of which doesn't give away the story.

solely on seeing the (summer) trailer twice. The movie was "Mona Lisa Smile" starring Julia Roberts as the new teacher at an exclusive, private girls school. When I saw the full movie in the fall, the only changes I made were the addition of character names, places, and dates. I got it right only because the studio decided to explain the entire plot of the movie in less than three minutes—six months in advance.

It's impossible to ignore trailers completely, but there is something you can do to avoid them when spending money at a theater. The current industry standard is filling the first 20 minutes at the start of a screening with a half-dozen or so trailers and commercials. Buy your ticket early (or online) and enter the screening fashionably late.

*Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has provided film content to over 30 print and online media outlets. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a weekly contributor to the Shannon Burke Show on Florida-ManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles. He favors dark comedy, thrillers, and documentaries.*

**The trailer business has become its own cottage industry.**

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