



Leave Her To Heaven

"I'll never let you go. Never, never, never.."



A technicolor film noir

At the 45th annual New York Film Festival, director Martin Scorsese observed that ***Leave Her To Heaven*** was “like a film noir in color” and the “glowing and gleaming technicolor” created a “super, almost hyper real world” that was usually reserved for musicals and westerns. Although purists will argue that classic film noir is always shot in black and white, Scorsese emphasized “the mood” of ***Leave Her to Heaven*** was indeed noir.

That sums it up well but this 1945 adaptation of Ben Ames Williams’ best selling novel amounts to a lot more. Propelled by Gene Tierney’s hypnotic lead performance and a layered screenplay by Jo Swerling,

the film is as irresistible as its troubled main character. In the simplest of terms, it is about obsession taken to its deepest and darkest level and it has a dreamy, mystical hook that lingers long after the final fadeout. It became the top box-office performer at Twentieth Century Fox in the 1940s and brought Gene Tierney her first and only Oscar nomination for Best Actress. Although she lost to Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce*, Tierney made the character of Ellen Berent fatally alluring and utterly captivating. Visually, the film is stunning under the Oscar winning cinematography of Leon Shamroy, who finds the darkness lurking underneath the vivid colors and textures of the Southwest desert, a picturesque lake house and a plush estate on the coast of Maine.

Strangers on a train ...

The fateful first meeting between Ellen (Gene Tierney) and Richard (Cornel Wilde) in a lavish Art Deco club car.



Ellen to Richard: “You look so much like my father.”



Room for two and no more

The story pivots on the powerful lure of Ellen Berent (Tierney), who encounters a handsome and ambitious writer on a train that is taking them to the New Mexico desert. The writer (Richard Harland, played by Cornel Wilde) is planning to work on his latest novel, while Ellen is traveling with her family to scatter her deceased father's ashes in the desert mountains. After a round of flirtatious bantering, Richard becomes putty in the crosshairs of her crazy beauty and their courtship begins in earnest. Ellen summarily jilts her fiancé in order to marry Richard and take center stage in his life.

Wilde is passive and slow to boil as Richard. He is an object of desire caught between two women: Ellen and her adopted sister Ruth, played by a demure Jeanne Crain. Wilde's detached acting style makes his gradual epiphany about Ellen entirely convincing and it is an effective counterpoint to Tierney's feverish performance as Ellen. Crain mostly watches from the sidelines until the final twenty minutes of the film.



The film's title is drawn from William Shakespeare's Hamlet. In Act I, Scene V, the Ghost urges Hamlet not to seek vengeance against Queen Gertrude, but rather to "leave her to heaven, and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge to prick and sting her."

In a 1985 interview for France's "Cinema, Cinemas," Gene Tierney explained how difficult it was for her to play such a deranged character. "When I read the script, I was tormented at first. I thought, she is so evil. Then I thought, I know what she is: she's just insane. Jealousy had made her go insane. I let my eyes go wild in some scenes."



Left to Right: Gene Tierney as Ellen; Jeanne Crain as her adopted sister Ruth; Mary Phillips as their mother; Ray Collins as a family friend; and Cornel Wilde as Richard.



“Ellen always wins.”

The story intensifies when Ellen learns of Richard’s steadfast devotion to his younger brother Danny, who is crippled with polio. Operating under the pretense of nurturing the young boy to health and encouraging him to be independent, she regards him as competition for Richard’s attention and love. In a disturbing scene, she rows Danny (Darryl Hickman) into the middle of a lake and manipulates him into swimming to the other side to impress his brother. Director John M. Stahl shot the scene on location and accentuated the sunlight and gorgeous scenery to give it a heightened sense of realism. The absence of background music and the natural sounds of the outdoors make the sequence feel even more realistic. Throughout the harrowing scene, Tierney maintains an outward mask of cold-blooded resolve in her white terrycloth robe and dark sunglasses.



*The 'accidental' drowning of
Danny (Darryl Hickman)*



Ellen to Danny:

*“Take it easy. You don’t want to
give up when you’ve come this far.”*



Martin Scorsese on Gene Tierney:

“Her face was like a mask of composure that was hiding these dark and very deep emotions. The technicolor is matched to the strange, other worldly perfection of her face. They reinforce each other.”



Jeanne Crain as Ruth is a sort of beige alter ego to the saturated beauty of Gene Tierney. She plays the overlooked adopted sister who bides her time and eventually assumes an important role in Richard's life. The physical resemblance between the two actresses plays an integral part in the final scene of the film.



As the jilted fiancé and politically ambitious district attorney, Vincent Price puts on a histrionic display of fireworks in the climactic courtroom scenes. His performance dominates the entire sequence and, like Tierney, his intensity makes Cornel Wilde recede into the nondescript fabric of the witness chair upholstery.



Mother Knows Best

“There’s nothing wrong with Ellen. It’s just that she loves too much.”



“I don’t envy you, Ellen. I’m sorry for you. You’re the most pitiful creature I’ve ever known.”

“Yes, I did it. I let him drown and I’d do it again. I didn’t want him around. I didn’t want anyone but you.”



Location, location, location

The screenplay for ***Leave to Her Heaven*** is divided into four parts and each one takes place in distinctly different locales. The introductory segment is in the New Mexico desert (actually Sedona, Arizona); the second segment is set in Warm Springs, Georgia where Danny is staying at a convalescent hospital; the third section takes place at a scenic lake retreat called “Back Of the Moon” in rural Maine (although it was filmed at Bass Lake, California); and the fourth segment, shot mostly on a soundstage, unfolds at the Berent estate in Bar Harbor, Maine.



Cinematographer Leon Shamroy expertly captures the look, feel and personality of each location. The early shots of the red mountains outside of Sedona depict the mystical beauty of the desert in all of its glory. These sequences establish the unhealthy attachment between Ellen and her father and lay the groundwork for her to groom Richard as his

successor. The film conveys an intriguing blend of mystery and mysticism in these passages. All of it makes the extent of Ellen's obsession with Richard plausible as the film progresses.



The later sequences shot on location at Bass Lake present a sun-drenched landscape of robust health and vigor. Shamroy's camera takes advantage of the natural light to emphasize the unsettling disparity between the placid exterior and what is unraveling indoors. Ellen grows increasingly agitated when she is forced to share Richard's affection with friends and family within the confines of the lake house. She complains to Richard that the "walls are thin as paper and the acoustics disgustingly perfect."

The direction by John M. Stahl meshes seamlessly with Shamroy's camera work and the interior art

direction by Lyle Wheeler, Maurice Ransford and Thomas Little to plot Ellen's progression from possessive neediness to maniacal behavior. The depth of her madness starts to surface in this segment. It's almost as if the sunny landscape surrenders to the darkness that dominates the rest of story.

The last scene of the film shows Cornel Wilde reuniting with Jeanne Crain at the lake house where Ellen murdered Danny. Crain is wearing a white dress that resembles the white robe Tierney wore when she let Danny drown. Crain's far away look and her embrace of Richard have been interpreted by some as fulfilling Ellen's promise that she would never let him go. Thanks in large part to Tierney's searing performance, Ellen's indomitable spirit seems to engulf the couple as the final credits roll.

*Film director Neil LaBute on
Leave Her To Heaven:*

*"A very lurid sort of film noir,
but drenched in blazing
sunlight. [There is] nothing
quite like it."*



AWARDS FOR LEAVE HER TO HEAVEN

1946 Academy Awards



Won

Best Cinematography, Color Leon Shamroy

Nominated

Best Actress Gene Tierney

Best Art Direction - Interior Decoration, Color

- Lyle R. Wheeler
- Maurice Ransford
- Thomas Little

Best Sound, Recording Thomas T. Moulton
(20th Century-Fox SSD)



Written and Researched by

Michael Hadley

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Sources

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