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Summary

The themes of individual initiative and private property, the family as the basic unit of society, and an individual's relationship to society are central to the film *Shenandoah* (1965), starring James Stewart as a Virginia farmer struggling to preserve his family's freedom during the turmoil of the Civil War.

Word count: 718

“When an officer tells Charlie that, ‘Virginia needs all her sons,’ Charlie replies, ‘That may be so,...but these are my sons. They don’t belong to the state.’”

Sons of the state, or citizens of society?

by *Kathryn Hickok*

This month, Oscar-watchers have their eyes on Renée Zellweger, nominated for Best Supporting Actress in *Cold Mountain*. As the tough and capable Ruby, Zellweger holds together a struggling North Carolina farm during the Civil War. Those who want more of the beautiful mountains and valleys of the Blue Ridge might seek out the 1965 classic *Shenandoah*.

Set in Virginia, *Shenandoah* follows the life of Charlie Anderson (James Stewart), a widower with seven adult children and 500 acres. Asked when he is, “going to take this war seriously,” Charlie replies, “My corn I take serious because it’s my corn, and my potatoes and my tomatoes and fences I take note of because they’re mine. But this war is not mine and I take no note of it.” The themes of individual initiative and private property, the family as the basic unit of society, and an individual’s relationship to society come across strikingly throughout the film.

A staunch believer in self-sufficiency, Charlie sums up his philosophy every night in his grace before meals, “It wouldn’t be here, we wouldn’t be eating it, if we hadn’t done it ourselves..., but we thank you anyway.” He takes pride in his family’s ability to take care of themselves. “I can grow everything I’ve a mind to plant,” he says.

The Andersons vigilantly defend their property from intruders during some of the roughest days of Virginia’s history. The cinematography repeatedly illustrates this: Whenever the sound of a horse’s hooves is heard, Charlie and his sons put down their tools and congregate, ready to ask the hostile visitor his business.

They resist being strong-armed into unwillingly selling the fruits of their labors. Federal purchasing agents offer a fixed price for Charlie’s prized horses, threatening to commandeer them if Charlie refuses to sell. The youngest Anderson asks what “commandeer” means. “Steal,” replies his father.

The rights of the family and the prerogatives of parents are central to Charlie’s philosophy. He faithfully fulfills his deceased wife’s wishes regarding their upbringing. When an officer tells Charlie that, “Virginia needs all her sons,” Charlie replies, “That may be so,...but these are my sons. They don’t belong to the state.”

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Charlie takes his parental responsibilities seriously. He tells his children, “You were raised to say what you think.” He motivates them to reason soundly and gives them the option to choose freely whether or not to join Virginia’s army, each according to his conscience. Charlie has raised free, mature persons, not rubber stamps of himself.

Passionately loyal to each other, the Andersons take responsibility for each other’s welfare. When the youngest boy is captured by the Union Army, the whole family rides after him. Their sense of family belonging is strong. When the daughter marries, her husband seems subsumed into the Anderson family, rather than she becoming part of her husband’s.

In their solidarity with each other and their ability to support themselves, the Anderson family is society in microcosm. However, conflicts arise where that society interfaces with the larger society of Virginia. Charlie insists that what does not happen on his land does not concern him, but one of his sons believes that, “whatever concerns Virginia concerns us.”

Here, Charlie’s philosophy of independence is problematic. He cares for his family and property but avoids the issue of whether or not he has responsibilities regarding his neighbors’. He sees the war solely in terms of defending another’s “right” to own slaves, a “right” with which he strongly disagrees. He never considers the implications of war for the liberties of his state versus the federal government, or for the legitimate property of himself and his neighbors.

As law and order break down, the Andersons need more than just themselves. Scavengers murder two of them in their home because no one else is around. Neighbors save the life of another. Citizens are the first defense against the lawlessness that threatens all.

Shenandoah is an interesting case study in whether or not one person’s independence can survive the instability of the wider society. Here, one may ponder the legitimate claims of society where the common defense of citizens is concerned. The Andersons’ solidarity as a family and how they respond to the gradual chipping away of their freedom, can lead viewers to think about the interdependence of individual rights and the common good.

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