

# 'Cool Hand Luke': A Christ Figure?

Hollywood — The theory that says Christ would not be recognized if he were to appear today is getting an unusual test from a chain-gang film called "Cool Hand Luke."

For some people will see the film and come away with no doubt in their minds that the principal character — a rebellious prisoner played by Paul Newman — is a Christ figure, no question about it.

Others will see the same picture and say that those other people are seeing things.

The "things" are known to students of the film art form as "symbolism" — what many modern moviemakers use to get across some ideas that might not otherwise prove commercially acceptable. So they sneak in certain camera shots of unobtrusive objects in the background, or pose actors in certain ways, and otherwise shoot the film so that people who know how to "read" films will get the message.

"Cool Hand Luke" appears to be such a film, based on early commentaries about it, and the message that is to be gotten, apparently, has to do with Christ's ever-present power to lift up even the most degraded segments of humanity.

In "Cool Hand Luke" (symbol hunters will undoubtedly find something in the title to support their interpretation of the film), Lucas Jackson has been sentenced to two years on a chain gang after a drunken, rebellious spree in a southern city.

He is sent to a barracks-like prison to join a chain gang, whose members have been treated inhumanely by cold, callous guards. Luke's strong spirit, however, brings life to the prisoners, who even learn from Luke how to enjoy the menial, backbreaking roadwork they must do. He escapes from the prison a number of times, each time being captured again, each time promising that he will try again. At the film's end, when he has apparently been killed, it is obvious that Luke has brought new dignity to the prisoners, who believe that he is probably still alive somewhere. What has caused some people to see Luke as a Christ figure is the symbolism they see in the film. The critic for Long Island, N.Y.'s "Newsday" expressed no uncertainty about the allegory, which he said helps make the film "one of the year's most ambitious and exciting American movies."

Rochester actors and backstage technicians will join with the colleges in production of "Cool Hand Luke" at Nazareth College Arts Center in early March. "His fellow prisoners become his disciples. He performs a 'miracle.' He is entombed for three days in the prison sweat box. He is martyred."

The "martyrdom" takes place in an abandoned Negro church, where Luke has just finished a conversation with "the boss upstairs," a scene which some viewers have seen as a parallel of Christ's Agony in the Garden.

There are numerous crucifix symbols to be seen — if they are looked for. The final fade-out is an overhead shot of a crossroad. Luke is constantly talking with either his fellow prisoners or "the boss upstairs," with his arms outstretched. And following a scene in which Luke has eaten 50 hard-boiled eggs in one hour (because he said he could), "Newsday" commented:

"Director Stuart Rosenberg's color camera peers down in an overhead shot as Newman smiles, victorious, exhausted, prostrate on a table, his arms outstretched and his legs crossed at the ankle in a crucifixion pose. A skeptic, who lost the bet, shakes his head, still disbelieving the 'impossible' feat: 'Nobody can eat 50 eggs.'"

But there have been more skeptics than that one about "Cool Hand Luke." Moira Walsh, in a review for the Catholic monthly, "Extension," confessed: "I am not quite sure what 'Cool Hand Luke' is trying to say," and thought it was nothing more than a film "concerned with brutal prison conditions... and an exceptional prisoner whose unshakable courage and 'free spirit' inspires some warmth and amity among his degraded fellow prisoners."

Even some of the rave reviews "Cool Hand Luke" has received (from "The New York

Times" and "The Saturday Review" among others) say nothing at all about the Christ figure idea, indicating that not everyone reads symbols the same way. And some would argue that Luke can hardly be seen as a Christ figure when, in the course of the film, he is drunk, he is shown in the company of B-girls, and he seems to deny the existence of God.

The National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, after receiving myriad opinions from its consultants, has taken no definite position but has simply commented:

"The stage is set for sardonic commentary on the futility, inhumanity and injustice of such a penal system (where) the wardens are cold and hard, more so than any prisoner. Sentences are severe, and incidentally punishments degrading.

"Some will see Luke merely as one of its pathetic victims, but through symbolism and religious references, others will see him as a Christlike figure, whose spirit arises above ad-

versity and death itself. He can also be interpreted as a man who achieves the immortality of a myth because of his courage in the face of the absurdities of the film's godless universe."

NCOMP also thought that "because of this ambiguity in theme, some of the film's sardonic and coarse treatment is of doubtful artistic value or necessity" and classified it "A", unobjectionable for adults, with reservations.

(Catholic Press Features)



Is "Cool Hand Luke" (played by Paul Newman) intended to be in some obscure way, a symbolic figure of Christ?

## Colleges Plan Marlowe Play

Rochester actors and backstage technicians will join with the colleges in production of "Cool Hand Luke" at Nazareth College Arts Center in early March.

This will be the first opportunity for local talent to work in a production especially designed for the only thrust stage in the area. Dr. Faustus is a show eminently suited for the stage.

The play will be produced by Ken Cameron, professor in Studio Arts at the University of Rochester, directed by Joseph Baranowski, of Nazareth College, and sets by Carl Zollo, of the Blackfriars.

There will be open readings for the many parts, predominantly male, on Friday, Jan. 12 and Saturday, Jan. 13 at 4:30 p.m. at Lower Strong, University of Rochester. Anyone interested in any of the backstage arts is invited to these readings to express their interests, or to contact Joseph Baranowski at Nazareth College, 586-2420.

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## Blackfriars Auditions

Casting auditions will be held Jan. 15 and 16 by the Blackfriars in their studio at 892 Clinton Ave. S. at 8:00 p.m. for their next production, "Thurber Carnival". The play is scheduled to be shown at St. John Fisher College on March 29, 30 and 31, under the direction of Mr. Bill White.

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## Catholic Hour Presentation

The dynamic tradition by which the Catholic faith has developed since New Testament times is the theme of the NBC-TV "Catholic Hour" for Sunday, Jan. 14.

The program entitled "Roots of Change" is the second part of the current series "The Catholic Faith — A New Perspective" and is produced by the National Council of Catholic Men in association with the National Broadcasting Company. The "Catholic Hour" is aired by the network from 1:30-2 p.m.

The Catholic Hour series was written by Mr. Eugene Fontinell, chairman of the Philosophy Department of Queen's College and Mr. William Birmingham, general editor of Mentor-Omega Books for the New American Library.

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