

FROM HERE TO ETERNITY

Directed by Fred Zinnemann
Produced by Buddy Adler
Distributed by Columbia Pictures
Released in 1953

Conflict is a key to good drama. Perhaps, also, is contrast. *From Here to Eternity* details the passions, prejudices, hates, and loves of Army personnel stationed in Hawaii on the brink of war. Ultimately the story concerns a Sergeant Warden and a Private Pruitt and their decisions to embrace the hard Army life rather than settle down with the women they love. But in many ways it is the setting which makes the story. While days pass into months and time marches inexorably towards a yet-unknown day of reckoning, the soft Tropical breezes lure these struggling, raging men into thinking that life can be more than a morass of frustrations and lost hopes.

Pruitt seemed determined to marry the radiant Alma, but she was fixated on becoming 'proper,' perhaps to overcome her shame from prostitution. Regarding their domestic arrangements, Pruitt had commented, "This is like being married, ain't it?" / "It's better," Alma replied. Finally, in desperation, she agrees to marry Pruitt, convinced that, otherwise, she'll never see him again. But he feels obligated to return to his company and wage war. Sergeant Warden tries to become the officer his lover wants him to be, but he cannot stomach the risk of becoming an obtuse skunkhead like her husband, his boss. While not a prostitute, Karen has known many men in an adulterous capacity. Both Pruitt and Warden are jealous and hate the idea of not having his woman exclusively. But they both reject their women when it comes time to make hard choices about the future.

Interestingly, when Captain Holmes confronts his wife, trying to determine whom she is having an affair with, she remarks that it's strange that he is so upset, when he is running around on her constantly. He replies that it's just different for men, that a woman committing an indiscretion is more significant. We are immediately inclined to dismiss his viewpoint, not just for the hypocrisy inherent in it, but because he is a thoroughly unlikable character. But what do Warden and Pruitt do in the end? They walk away, refusing to make permanent the relationships they had demanded be taken seriously. The two women, at the film's conclusion, unwittingly sharing the same melancholy boat ride, seem wounded beyond repair. Karen is wistful, dispassionate—perhaps never willing to risk heartbreak again. Alma is fighting back bitterness, trying to convince herself of her own lies, telling Karen that her fiancée was "proper," so that maybe she can be deemed respectable, too. What's worse, she may have now set upon a life of full-time lies. (What's so great about this scene is that once Karen recognizes the name of Robert E. Lee Pruitt, we never get to see whether she asked more questions and the two had a real discussion about their respective men.)

For all their admirable qualities, Pruitt and Warden disappoint. Someone's got to take the lead in these relationships. Why would Army men, trained to know the importance of a chain of command and clear communication, make things harder than they need to be?

The real question posed to the audience is, Who deserves more—the United States armed forces, or one's paramour? (And beyond that, Should a man put the Army behind him before he *risks* falling in love?) They both made commitments to the United States. But did they not also make commitments to these women when they had sex? If they're not married, and there's no explicit commitment to each other, than why do Pruitt and Warden get jealous at the thought of their lovers being with other men? Why should it matter if they're just sex-buddies?

Something mysterious, something special happens when a man and a woman unite, even if that union is fleeting and blindly sensuous. Maybe that's a reason why the scene of Lancaster and Kerr delighting in the interplay of surf and sex has become iconic. And it's because they've been intimate that this exchange between Alma and Pruitt, after Alma has rejected any discussion of marriage, has such poignancy: "I do mean it when I say I need you... 'cause I'm lonely. You think I'm lying, don't you?" / "Nobody ever lies about being lonely."

While it seems that Pruitt and Warden are on parallel courses regarding their romantic complications (which they discuss, albeit fleetingly), they do come into conflict in the course of the story regarding regimental boxing. Pruitt doesn't want to box, and Warden wants him to, since that will make Holmes happy, which will make things easier for the sergeant. Simply put, Warden is being selfish, Pruitt is not. But the irony is telling—Holmes wants fighting but he's ignoring the true conflict brewing in the Pacific. Pruitt doesn't want to fight, but when it comes to confronting the Japanese, he's willing to die rather than abandon his unit. And as Warden slowly begins to respect Pruitt as a man of courage and conviction (rather than a hard-headed contrarian), he does his best to protect this extraordinarily multi-faceted boxer, bugler, and patriot from the selfish designs of the regiment's ruling clique.

Finally we must consider the role of Maggio. He is characterized by irascibility and love of life. He gives little thought to consequences (as best characterized when he shuns guard duty and goes AWOL), and is drunk with irresponsibility, much like America at the time. His death leads to Holmes's ouster and Pruitt's devastating wounds. The peacetime mentality, prioritizing self-advancement, amusement, and the settling of grudges, takes a fatal hit with Maggio's death, then is left for dead on December 7th of '41.

The uniquely American restlessness characterized in *From Here to Eternity* is all the more poignant because of the circumstances confronting these lost souls on the cusp of war. Americans always struggle in an "incessant pursuit of both material prosperity and perfect political equality," according to Professor Peter Augustine Lawler. Writing in 1997, he continues: "As their diversions fail, individualism, or apathetic withdrawal, becomes more attractive [...] [What results is] a complete surrender, [Alexis de] Tocqueville says, of their concern for the future, a total immersion in the present [...], a therapeutic judgment that it is better not to be moved by awareness of one's death."

All the significant characters struggle, in different ways, to define their existence—to clumsily assert control (like Maggio and Fatso), feign passivity (Pruitt and Karen), or plot and scheme (Holmes, Warden, and Alma). But they all flail in the dark, each dogged by his fears and flummoxed by contradictory objectives. The Bible speaks to this phenomenon as storing up riches on earth, rather than riches in Heaven. It's a mirage. We can't hold onto our youth, we can't stay healthy, beauty fades. And there's never enough money to make us feel secure. If we live for today then we always lose, for we can no more hold onto today than we can hold back the tide.

How appropriate that the story centers on an Army base in Hawaii. Far more than a Fort Benning or a Fort Huachuca, it would be easy for military personnel to be lulled into a sense of complacency amidst the siren call of paradise. It was hard enough for Americans on the mainland to fathom that Japan would ever attack. How much more difficult it must have been to believe war would ever intrude upon these passionate loves and losses birthed in a world all its own. *From Here to Eternity* isn't about innocence lost. It's about one kind of pain being supplanted by another—the pain of dreams deferred yielding to the horrors of war.