

RIO BRAVO

Directed by Howard Hawks
Produced by Howard Hawks
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1959

Rio Bravo is a triumph. What could have been a moody meditation on murder, the corrupting power of wealth, and the loneliness of leadership is instead an incredibly entertaining film that uses its plot as a foundation for a story about love.

Love is more than a feeling. Consider: a gift is something given that is not owed. When something is given that is owed, that is an obligation fulfilled. But, while love is a multi-faceted concept, whether it is directed toward a brother-in-arms or a beautiful woman, love is mostly about sacrifice.

The duty-minded sheriff is in the middle. He shows and receives the love of Carlos, the hotel proprietor who feeds his best patron both food and intelligence; Stumpy, who provides grunt housekeeping labor and pessimistic advice; Colorado, who risks his life to save the sheriff even after he'd already told Chance that he thought it better to stay out of trouble; Dude (played by the shockingly good Dean Martin), who battles DTs (to destroy for good his debilitating alcoholism) and draws strength from the confidence the sheriff has in him; and last, Angie Dickinson's Feathers, who resolves to give her life over to Chance, offering him her affections and support with little assurance of reciprocation.

John Wayne pushed hard to get *Rio Bravo* produced as a counterpoint to Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952). Director Howard Hawks and his star agreed that Gary Cooper's sheriff should not have gone around town begging for help to defeat the vengeful outlaw. After all, sheriffs are hired to keep the peace, and if they expect help when trouble comes then they're shirking their duties. This hostility to such a we're-all-in-this-together mentality is made explicit through the character of the rancher, Pat Wheeler. He tries to convince Sheriff Chance to let him help and is immediately gunned down in cold blood. From there on, the sheriff is adamant that only a man with a badge will share the risks. Such is love—being willing to put yourself in harm's way to protect another, to fulfill an obligation when you could be excused from it, doing what is right even though you will not be praised (and may be condemned). While the sheriff does what he is supposed to and is owed nothing as a consequence, the ending of the film is still very satisfying, in part because such a man is so rare that we want him to be rewarded. After all, many people are paid to do jobs that they ultimately shirk. His recompense is Feathers, who will reward Sheriff Chance, for the rest of his life, for a job well done.