

The Beguiled

Don Siegel | USA | 1971 | 105 minutes

Credits

Director	Don Siegel
Screenplay	John B. Sherry, Irene Kamp (novel by Thomas Cullinan)
Photography	Bruce Surtees
Music	Lalo Schifrin

Cast

John McBurney	Clint Eastwood
Martha	Geraldine Page
Edwina	Elizabeth Hartman
Carol	Jo Ann Harris

In Brief

Injured Yankee soldier, John McBurney is rescued on the verge of death by a teenage girl from a southern boarding school. She manages to get him back to the school, and at first the all-female staff and pupils are scared. As he starts to recover, one by one he charms them and the atmosphere becomes filled with jealousy and deceit.



There is some surface pleasure in watching the most inane of films, a kind of excitement when you sit down in the cinema or turn your living room lights off at home. For a lot of films this can be the summit of their emotional journey and it is all downhill after the title sequence. This is not the case with *The Beguiled*, it is a fantastic film with a multilayered plot which requires thought and digestion even after the credits have finished. This is, in my opinion, the mark of a good film; it will stay with you for sometime afterwards.

Don Siegel, the director of *The Beguiled*, is better known for his work on *Dirty Harry*. Both films were released in 1971 and starred the chiselled and sunburnt Clint Eastwood. *The Beguiled* has suffered by comparison to *Dirty Harry*, American tastes wanted a hero and the film flopped at home. However do not let this deterred you; this is a rare chance to see the intelligence and range of Eastwood's acting. The cast also included Geraldine Page who is often hailed as one of the greatest American actresses and her performance should have garnered more interest at the time. Quite rightly- the film was received well in the international market and was for a short time considered for Cannes.

The story is a historical, metaphorical drama. This is a complex sub genre; it uses an important historic event as a backdrop to study the human condition and is normally reserved for the realms of academia as opposed to a cinema. In fact *The Beguiled* was adapted for the novel *A Painted Devil* written by Thomas P. Cullinan. Adaptation is never straightforward; the plot of the book is concerned with a group of women as the protagonist. Obvious this sort of structure is difficult to reflect on screen, Siegel approached this with a range of devices including flashbacks, dream sequences and internal narration.

The film is set in the south of America, Louisiana, at the time of the American Civil War. Yankee soldiers from the north were pushing through the southern defences and civilians had the choice to either flee or stand their ground. Caught in the middle of the war and set back from town an all girls school remains open.



One day while out gathering mushrooms a schoolgirl, Amy, discovers an injured Yankee soldier. She is conflicted on one hand the soldier is an enemy of the south and on the other she doesn't want to let anyone die. She alerts her school teachers and together they take him in and protect him from discovery. Initially the small group of girls mistrust him but reason that he would not survive military prison long enough to be sentenced. They decide to treat his gunshot wounds before alerting the southern army.

The soldier, who is called Mr McBee, realises that he could escape with the help of one of the girls. He tries in turn to manipulate all of the school girls and their teachers. Somewhere between his one liners and



ruggedly handsome face; each of the girls falls in love with him and this becomes his downfall.

The plot reveals obvious differences in how women love. Each of the girls fall under Mr McBee's spell in different ways; this depends upon their ages and their romantic histories. Two characters who could not be more different are Miss Edwina (a teacher) and Carole (her student). Miss Edwina falls into a romantic love for Mr McBee; she is convinced they will marry and that he reciprocates her love in the same manner. Meanwhile Carole pursues Mr McBee for carnal animalistic sex, she is a teenager and depicted as enslaved by her own hormones. When Miss Edwina discovers Carole and Mr McBee, she pushes him down the stairs and breaks his leg. While Carole was the sexually aggressive one she would rather call Mr McBee a rapist rather than admit the truth. Meanwhile Miss Edwina's vengeance does not last long and she is hoodwinked again by Mr McBee.

Far from succeeding in his womanising, which is what you might expect from Clint Eastwood, Mr McBee meets a sudden death. This is handed to him by the most innocent of all of his lovers- Amy. The twelve year old is the most caring of all the students, she looks after a black bird with a broken wing; she gathers extra food for the table and owns a pet turtle which she tries unsuccessfully to hand feed. Her heart is broken when she hears of Carole and Mr McBee. However she doesn't turn from him and gives him chance after chance to redeem himself. One night when he is drunk and aggressive she tries to defuse the situation. She asks him to feed her turtle- he kills her turtle. After some subtle coaching by her headmistress she decides to gather some poison mushrooms- especially for Mr McBee.

This is the highlight of the film and the message is clear: to try to manipulate people's emotions is dangerous. The choice to use Amy, the innocent, as the murderer is shocking. Perhaps this is the genius of the film as well; the message is so well delivered that it cannot fail to raise questions in the audience's minds. It reminds me of the play *The Crucible* which challenges attitudes towards women and sex in a similar way and is a theatrical masterpiece. *The Beguiled* takes thematic structure further looking at racism as well however it remain relatively unknown and I am not sure that is fair. I would suggest this film as essential Eastwood revision for anyone.

Lauren Hounsome, <http://www.filmwerk.co.uk>

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