



Eric Layton Illustration

Robin Hardy's 1973 film "The Wicker Man" has an ending with powerful imagery.

WICKER

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the missing girl is dead or alive — or even really missing. The real conflict at this point is between the sergeant's religious views and those of the islanders. With his strict morality, he tends to come off as a pompous reverend, forcing his virtues onto those around him. The islanders are a tad bit more accepting, yet that sinister tone persists in almost everything they do. When their conspiracy is finally revealed, it changes everything that has happened before. Rather than seem sinister, their actions are now downright horrifying.

Yet the film is more than a simple "good Christian, bad pagan" tale. The actions of the islanders are much more complex, being the natural outcome of their belief system when put under stress. What religion they belong to makes no difference; what matters is that it allows for drastic actions to

survive. The film can be read in a number of different ways: As a condemnation of religions which allow for violent actions in their faith, an attack on religious faith in general, or as a parable concerning Christian/pagan dynamics. While such readings can be fruitful, they are unnecessary by the film's conclusion. The simple, visceral power of the last few scenes says more than any amount of theological analysis ever could.

The film's strongest point is its refusal to choose sides. Rather than boiling down everything to good guy/bad guy dynamics, it leaves moral uncertainties and gray areas. Through its powerful imagery, it captures an odd sort of world and shows us, step by step, how religious belief can often lead people to commit atrocities. Yet the question of which is to blame, the people or the faith, is never answered.

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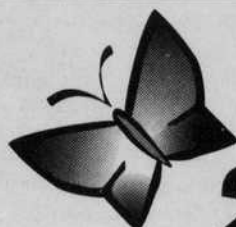
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