

All That Heaven Allows (1955) Directed by Douglas Sirk (1900–1987)
Film Workshop by Caryn Cline

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With: Rock Hudson (Ron Kirby), Jane Wyman (Cary Scott), Agnes Moorehead (Sara Warren), Virginia Grey (Alida Anderson), Charles Drake (Mick Anderson)

1. The film begins with an establishing shot of Stoningham, a small town/suburban community outside of “the city.” Douglas Sirk said that, at the time that this film was made, “America then was feeling safe and sure of herself, a society primly sheltering its comfortable achievements and institutions.” (Halliday, 113) What does the establishing shot communicate about the town? Sirk has referred to this film as a “fairy tale.” Discuss the “fairy tale” qualities of this film.
2. The first two scenes of the film, the scene between Sara and Cary and the scene between Cary and Ron, establish the tensions and themes of the film. What are those themes? Look carefully at the way in which each of the characters is dressed. This film relies heavily on clothing and color to make key points about the characters. What color(s) does Sara wear? Cary? Ron? (Notice, for instance, that Sara’s outfit is the same color as her station wagon.)
3. In an early scene, we meet Cary’s children, Ned and Kay. How are they characterized in these early scenes? Talking to her mother in the bedroom, Kay says (*a propos* her mother’s impending date with Harvey) that she disagrees with the old Egyptian custom of walling up the widow with her dead husband. “At least that doesn’t happen today,” Kay says. “Doesn’t it?” asks Cary. Sirk uses images inside Cary’s home to tell us that indeed Cary is being walled up alive. How does the “look” inside the house contribute to that reading?
4. Several early scenes are bathed in light that splits the frame between blue and yellow. We have seen these colors in the first scene, where they are associated with specific characters. What do they tell us about Cary’s dilemma?
5. For her night out with Harvey, Cary wears a red dress. Red is also an important color in Sirk’s scheme. What does it signify here? Where else does the color red appear? What color is Sara’s dress? What are the other

dominant colors here? What values are in evidence among the country club crowd?

6. There are many contrasts in the film: between pairs of characters and between settings, which underline the competing values in the film. Look for these throughout. For example, Ron's mill, which is refurbished over the course of the film, represents a tradition (his grandfather used to grind his flour there) and Kay and Ned speak in favor of the tradition represented by Cary's home. These different dwellings are clearly and concretely juxtaposed stylistically. What other contrasts such as this are there in the film?

7. The party at Sara's house, when Cary brings Ron, is contrasted with the party at Ron's friends Mick and Alita's. In what ways?

8. In the scene where Cary meets Mick and Alita, what is Alita wearing? What is their house like? What are Mick and Alita's values?

9. It is interesting to think about this film as another side of the "social problems" presented in *Rebel Without a Cause*. In that film, the younger generation is trying to break away from the corruption of an older generation. In *All That Heaven Allows*, it is the children in the family who are the most conservative. Look carefully at the scenes in which Cary is confronted by Ned and Kay. The scene with Ned is played out almost in the dark. How does the set design contribute to the sense of separation between Ned and Cary in this scene? A little later, Kay talks with Cary in her (Kay's) bedroom. Here the lighting is used to indicate the separation between them. How?

One of the things which film took on in the 50s was the competition from television. Many films were shot in a wide screen format in the 50s (to make them look different from television). Many more were made in color, particularly westerns, musicals and melodramas. Sometimes, as in this film, television plays a key role. Discuss the attitudes toward television expressed in the film. Pay particular attention to the scene in which Cary's children give her a TV.

In the final scene, which takes place in Ron's mill--now completely made over--what colors appear in the scene? Why might the director be saying through this color scheme?

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