

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Hearts of the World* (1918)**

D.W. Griffith

### OVERVIEW

**Director** D.W. Griffith (1875-1948) earned his place in film history as a Hollywood pioneer. Including all of his shorts and projects, Griffith produced nearly 500 films, many of which have been lost. His 1914 *Judith of Bethulia* was one of the first feature films produced in the United States, and many know him from his controversial 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. Only three of his films include recorded sound. Many film and editing techniques that are now commonplace were first used by Griffith in the early 1900s. Despite his many accolades and firsts, D.W. Griffith remains widely criticized; *The Birth of a Nation*, for example, is often said to be one of the key factors in the Ku Klux Klan's revival in the interwar period.

**Film** *Hearts of the World* was a globe-trotting production Griffith made at the behest of the British government to change the minds of the American public about the necessity of supporting their European allies during WW1. Production began in May 1917 in England where most of the outdoor shots were filmed. Unlike most journalists, Griffith and his crew were given special permission to film in the trenches during two trips to France. The crew came under German artillery fire during one of these outings, and, luckily, none of them were harmed. In November 1917, production moved back to Los Angeles, where British and Canadian troops helped to create realistic battle scenes. With a box office return of over \$1.5 million, *Hearts of the World* was considered a rousing success although after the Armistice in November 1918, Americans largely abandoned the film, losing interest in war pictures.

**Background** The first American feature produced as a war propaganda film made during an ongoing conflict, *Hearts of the World* would be the last in a trio of war films produced by Griffith starting with *The Birth of a Nation*. This break from the pattern would end with the production of *America* in 1924, depicting the Revolutionary War. There are several potential reasons for Griffith's turn toward melodrama for his next several films: depictions of warfare rapidly grew unpopular in a war-weary postwar public, and in later interviews, Lillian Gish (who plays The Girl) said that Griffith was upset with the way he portrayed the Germans, saying that he told her, "War is the villain, not any particular people," on multiple occasions. *Hearts of the World* and other similar propaganda films have been credited with encouraging hatred of the Central Powers and complicating the peace efforts at Versailles. Griffith, in a rare moment of public humility, seems to have taken this criticism to heart. Several versions of the film are still in circulation, as many states and municipalities saw fit to censor the more violent or sexually suggestive moments in the movie, and an original print is held in the archives of the Cohen Media Group.

### CHARACTERS

*The Girl* – A young French woman who lives beside The Boy before falling in love with him  
*The Boy* – A young American man whose family becomes close friends with The Girl's family  
*The Little Disturber* – A traveling musician from the village who competes with The Girl for The Boy's affection  
*Monsieur Cuckoo* – A village man who falls in love with The Little Disturber  
*Von Strohm* – A German man living in the village who is revealed to be a spy after the outbreak of war.

### SYNOPSIS

In an eastern part of France, an American family settles down in a small village, quickly earning the respect of their French neighbors. As the relationship between the two families in their side-by-side houses grows, so does the relationship between the American's eldest boy and the eldest girl of the French family. Just as the two make preparations to marry, The Great War breaks out. The young lovers are separated when The Boy enlists to defend his new home. As the Germans push the front deeper into

France, both the village and The Boy fall. Wandering the battlefield after the guns fall silent, The Girl finds The Boy wounded and unconscious. Assuming he is dead, The Girl stumbles back to the village, deranged in her grief. After her departure, the Red Cross appears and takes the boy to the triage, where he gets treatment for his wounds.

The Village becomes an administrative center for the advancing Germans, and the villagers who remain serve them and their violent whims. After his recovery, The Boy is given a special mission: Disguised as a German officer, he enters the German-held village. Using his knowledge of the language, he is able to bluff his way into the inn at the village center, where the German officers drink and carouse. There, he is reunited with The Girl, but they are discovered speaking in private by a German officer and The Boy is forced to kill the German. The Boy tries to hide the body from a high-ranking officer and former neighbor, Von Strohm, but the body is discovered and Von Strohm raises the alarm. Locked in an upstairs room, The Boy and The Girl find themselves in a race against time, caught between the Allies' advance and the vengeful Germans trying to break through the locked door.

## SCENES

**Prologue-** "We beg your indulgence," says a title card, "for this short prologue. It has no possible interest, save to vouch for the rather unusual event of an American producer being allowed to take pictures on an actual battlefield." The next title card whisks us away to the French and British trenches on the front lines in Europe. The next several shots show Griffith speaking with men in the trenches as he and his crew set up cameras before a title card takes us to London, where Griffith is seen again, shaking hands with Prime Minister David Lloyd George outside No. 10 Downing Street. After a long credit sequence, a title card begins the film: "God help the nation that begins another war of conquest or meddling! Brass bands and clanging sabers make very fine music, but let us remember there is another side of war." Another card continues, "After all, does war ever settle any question? The South was ruined—thousands of lives were sacrificed—by the Civil War; yet, did it really settle the Black and White problem in this country?"



**Peaceful days-** A final opening title card brings the camera to a peaceful French village in 1912. People lounge in the soft grass near a hillside where children play before the town's busy marketplace appears. Another title card takes the camera to a double house on "Rue de la Paix (the street of Peace)," the main setting of the pre-war story. Inside, The Girl, the daughter of the French family, returns home after a trip. With a porter in tow, she enters the parlor and greets her parents carrying a large bundle. She places it on the table before doting on her grandfather, who sits by the fireside. On the other side of the house, The Boy, the son of an American painter, reads a letter while his mother tries to feed him and his father a teatime snack. She becomes upset when they refuse her offering, but The Boy is able to calm her down quickly with a hug and a kiss.



**Goslings-** The Girl is hard at work in a garden, tilling rows with a hoe. A title card reads, "Three harmless little goslings." The camera finds The Girl seated with two goslings climbing into her lap. The other gosling, however, has found its way out of the garden and wanders into the neighbor's yard, disturbing The Boy. When The Girl rushes after the baby goose, he starts helping her, but is frustrated when the gosling hides in the bushes. He begins throwing stones at it and The Girl scolds him before coaxing the little bird out with sweet words. The Boy catches the gosling and gives it to The Girl who skips away back to her garden. Sometime later in her bedroom, she prays, "Please make me so nice and good that Boy will love me forever and ever."



**Hero worship-** A title card introduces The Boy's younger brothers, the youngest of which is "inclined to hero-worship." While the other family members entertain themselves in their backyard, The Boy and his youngest brother sit and read a book together. The young boy reaches out and grabs The Boy's cravat before trying to stick his finger in his nose. The Boy grins down at him as the little boy pulls his hand away and snuggles close. Sometime later, The Boy reads from his own manuscript to his parents. His youngest brother sits by his foot, looking up at him before pretending to be a bootblack and then wrapping his arms and legs around his brother's shin. The Boy takes minimal notice, continuing his recitation when The Girl and her mother enter the yard, listening. The parents go inside to visit, leaving The Boy and The Girl somewhat alone. Timidly, The Boy gives The Girl his manuscript, and she takes it with equal sheepishness. Later, she reads the verses of "love—deathless, undying." The Boy catches sight of The Girl, who giggles over his poem. He admires her smiling face and the shape of her legs from afar before the scene fades to black.



**Street singer-** A title card introduces The Little Disturber as a street singer visiting from Paris. In the busy market, a crowd gathers around a woman who strums a lute and sings. The camera ducks into the crowd, watching from a lower angle as she dances and acts out some comic tale she'd heard in the city. The crowd laughs as she finishes, but no one drops any coins into her upturned tambourine. The Little Disturber stomps away haughtily.



**Two rejections-** Near the homes of The Boy and The Girl, Monsieur Cuckoo, one of their neighbors, argues with the village carpenter. The Little Disturber walks by, tambourine outstretched, asking for alms. Monsieur Cuckoo takes out his coin purse, ready to give her something when the carpenter reaches in and plunks a large coin into her tambourine, stealing Cuckoo's thunder. The Boy returns home, and The Little Disturber tries to flirt with him, but he's uninterested. Monsieur Cuckoo tries to make another pass at her, but The Little Disturber flicks his nose and walks away.



**Von Strohm-** Von Strohm is introduced as a "tourist" by a title card. Tall and broad-shouldered, the German agent seems to tower over a villager as he tips his hat politely and strikes up a conversation. A quick flash to a war room in Berlin shows several high-ranking officers drawing up war plans. In a nearby inn, a deaf and blind violinist plays while a barmaid cleans glasses. Von Strohm enters the inn and discretely whispers something to a dour-faced woman before handing her a wad of cash.



**The wall between-** The Girl overhears some street performers singing and wanders outside to listen to them. She leans against the garden wall, sighing dreamily. On the other side of the wall, The Boy smokes a cigarette. He listens to the love song being sung in the street, sighing just like The Girl. His desires spurred by the song's lyrics, The Boy opens the door between the gardens and finds the girl standing there. His brothers watch from their room above as he embraces The Girl. Jealous of their brother paying attention to someone else, the younger brothers open their window and shout disruptively, breaking up the two young lovers for a moment. The Boy quickly recovers from this slight embarrassment, inviting The Girl on a walk by the river.



**Perseverance and perfume-** A Title card reads, “Von Strohm, much interested in village architecture—and foundations.” The tall German wanders down a street, stopping to prod the mortar of a nearby building with the tip of his cane. Looking for another wall to inspect, he stumbles on a woman and attempts to strike up a conversation. She slams a door in his face. Sometime later, The Little Disturber walks up the same road toward The Boy’s home. She stops for a moment and, after assuring she’s alone, douses herself with perfume, comically tossing the bottle aside. Soon, The Boy exits his garden and The Little Disturber pretends to bump into him by accident before beginning to flirt. She begs for The Boy to take her on a walk, pressing herself close, but The Boy avoids her, shooing her off eventually. The Little Disturber throws herself at The Boy, kissing him. The Girl oversees and is distraught, laughing hysterically as she enters her family’s garden.



**The end of the world-** After a title card reading, “The end of the world,” The Boy approaches The Girl somewhere in the village. After he sits, The Girl hands him several of his love tokens. The Boy is confused at first, but quickly realizes the significance of her action, begging for an explanation. As if suddenly swayed by his display of emotion, she takes back the papers and baubles. The Boy kisses her hand, whispering in her ear, “Only you—forever and ever.” The girl agrees, “Forever and ever.” In the backyard of The Boy’s home, a small party gathers to celebrate the coming wedding between the two young lovers. The Boy’s brothers walk to the couple, the youngest apparently still jealous of The Girl for taking his brother’s attention. The Girl quickly brings him to his side with some friendly banter. Outside the garden, The Little Disturber paces, waiting for The Boy. She attempts to strike up a conversation when he exits, but The Girl joins him quickly, and they walk away together. Feeling rejected, The Little Disturber unenthusiastically accepts Monsieur Cuckoo’s invitation for a walk.



**Wedding clothes-** A short scene shows the German military establishment working on their plans “against France and civilization.” In The Girl’s home, she works diligently, sewing a dress for her wedding. “With white thread and whiter dreams, she works on her wedding clothes,” a title card reads. Excitedly, she acts out the wedding march for her mother before they share a tender moment. The Boy enters and greets The Girl, who tries to hide her dress, as is tradition. He teases her a moment before opening a letter, the real reason for his visit: His novel has won an award. The two chatter excitedly. Outside, a man with a drum reads a decree from the government, drawing a crowd. The Boy leaves to investigate, giving The Girl a chance to hide her dress. The village market bustles with activity: War has been declared. After reading a proclamation posted on a wall in the marketplace, The Boy returns to The Girl with the news. Both look forlorn, fearing what the news means for their plans.



**Parliament, Aug 3, 1914-** A title card transports the camera to the English Parliament. Another title card reads, “Sir Edward Grey asks the Commons if it be their will to support France and protect the neutrality of Belgium.” The entire Parliament jumps to their feet, waving their hats and shouting in support. A similar scene plays out the next day in the Chamber of Deputies in France. Later that day, the Prime Minister of Britain and Winston Churchill await the German response to their proclamation. The clock ticks down: In only five minutes, the ultimatum set by the proclamation will have elapsed, meaning war. At the assigned time, 10 Downing Street springs into action, preparing the paperwork for a formal declaration of war.



**To the front-** The Boy's family gathers in the backyard to bid him farewell. "Though an American citizen," a title card explains, "believing the land that is good enough to live in is good enough to fight for, he makes his farewells and offers his life to France." His youngest brother is distraught, climbing into a chair to get closer. He hugs his brother, placing his beloved toy revolver in The Boy's uniform as a protective totem. They salute each other and hug one last time before The Boy turns his attention to the rest of his family, but he's surprised to find his youngest brother clinging to his neck, refusing to let go. In their spartan accommodations, Monsieur Cuckoo announces to The Little Disturber that he is joining the army, giving her a flower to remember him by. She is surprisingly upset, having fallen in love with him. "I'll be back in three weeks," He says confidently, "With a lock of hair, all for you—The Kaiser's mustache!" In The Girl's home, she and The Boy exchange photos, kissing each other after promising to marry after the fighting is over. The enlisted men of the village march away together toward the front.



**The Boy's regiment-** A title card explains that The Boy and his regiment are stationed just outside the Village. Several shots of men digging trenches are broken up by another title card: "The French swear to hold the trench, defending the village until the death." The Boy is seen among the men, working hard with a pickaxe. Several shots follow, showing the Germans march into their positions and dig their own trenches. Back in the village, The Girl and her family read letters from the front assuring them of their safety. These assurances lead The Boy and The Girl's families to remain when the Gendarme asks them to evacuate. "Danger? Impossible!" says The Girl's father, slamming his fist on the table. "The French Line can never be broken."



**German bombardment-** Soon, the German bombardment begins. The Boy is seen among other soldiers, hunkering behind the wall of their trench as the Germans advance under the cover of heavy mortar fire. A title card reading "War's old song of hate" appears before the Germans mass for a charge, overwhelming the French forces who flee or fall to their bayonets. Amid the chaos in the trenches, The Boy fights fiercely. A title card explains that a retreat is called, and the French forces flee from the trenches, explosions going off all around them. The Boy ignores the call, trying to resuscitate a fellow soldier. Monsieur Cuckoo appears, pulling him away from the trench just before a mortar strikes. Now far away, the camera watches the two armies form into ranks and clash outside the trenches. The French are pushed back to the trenches just before the village, and The Boy is distraught, knowing it means they've failed their families. As she lies down to sleep, The Girl prays for the boy and the other soldiers. The next morning, the village panics as the Germans draw closer and begin bombarding the town. In the chaos, The Boy and The Girl's families are trapped by the bombs.



**The night-** The battle rages on through the night, the remaining French forces fighting desperately to keep the Germans from taking the entire village. The Boy rallies men in the trenches while, in the village, The Girl wanders through the wreckage. A title card describes her mental state: "The Mind of the simple soul broken by shell and terror—sweet bells jangled, out of tune." She says a greeting to a corpse before skipping away as if playing. Under the rising moon, The Boy begins a charge, only to be struck by a bullet. His comrades leave him to continue the attack, leaving him for dead. Eventually, The Boy manages to crawl away from the fighting. Wounded soldiers and the remaining villagers scramble to flee the German advance. A wounded man tells The Girl where The Boy's regiment is fighting. He leaves, and The Girl clutches her wedding dress, thinking of The Boy.





**Struggle toward home-** The Battlefields empty of all but the wounded and dead, The Boy crawls toward the village. The camera jumps back to The Girl holding her wedding dress before a title card appears: "This was to have been their wedding day, so through a befogged and dizzy path, she goes to find her bridegroom." Close to the village, The Boy finally collapses, unable to go on. Shrouded in smoke and mist, The Girl wanders the battlefield draped in her wedding garb, looking for The Boy. She looks curiously at a corpse she passes, jolting away in horror and surprise when she realizes it is a dead man, but she recovers in her deranged way and continues her macabre wedding march. Eventually, she stumbles on The Boy. The Girl kneels down and caresses him before saying something and then lying her head on his chest. "And so they spend their bridal night," a title card reads. The Girl awakes the next morning, having found her senses again. She is shocked to find herself outside, and even more shocked to see The Boy. Unable to rouse him, she assumes him dead. After she runs off to find help, a group of soldiers finds the boy and takes him to a Red Cross triage.



**Refugees-** The German assault continues, pushing the French beyond the village. Unable to escape, those remaining in the Village take cover in the inn. Triumphant, the Germans march into the village. The Woman who took money from Von Strohm begins speaking with a German officer, accepting some document from him. The Girl faints while the other women of the village cry and hold each other. A title card decries the damage done to the village by the invading Germans, before the camera pans around, taking in the destruction. Many villagers, including The Boy's remaining family, take shelter in the basements of their former neighbors. The Germans force the villagers to work, The Boy's brothers shoveling coal and his mother doing domestic work. Despite their former rivalry, The Little Disturber nurses The Girl back to health in the inn.



**In the trenches-** "Our musketeers," a title card reads, "in a new French uniform but an old service, placed where they are sure to do their best—directly opposite their own village." In the trenches, Monsieur Cuckoo writes a letter to The Little Disturber, sealing it with a kiss, while another man from the village darns a sock. Another soldier walks up the trench: it's The Boy, recovered from his injuries. Monsieur Cuckoo jumps up and kisses him on both cheeks. In the village, The Little Disturber makes lovey-dovey eyes at a picture of The Boy by The Girl's bed in the inn. The Girl oversees her, and The Little Disturber seems to try and brush things off with a joke, showing The Girl the pocket watch Monsieur Cuckoo gave her. As if to comfort him, The Girl places The Boy's photo against her chest.

**Grenades-** Outside the inn, A group of German soldiers walks up with some crates. One orders beer from The Little Disturber, and she goes inside to fetch it. The soldiers sit and open one of the crates, revealing dozens of stick grenades. "Unscrew the little cap—" one soldier says, "and it's goodbye forever!" For some reason, a soldier also explains this to The Little Disturber, showing her where the cap is on a grenade before taking his beer. The gesture disturbs her and The Girl, who exits with the inn's laundry ready for the clotheslines. In a shiny black car, Von Strohm enters the village. He walks into the inn and threatens The Little Disturber when she recognizes him. Out in the fields beyond the village, the villagers toil in the fields picking crops. The girl tries to lift a heavy basket into the rear of a truck, but she's too weak. Her punishment is whipping. Von Strohm is seen arguing about philosophy with another officer, saying, "Might makes right!" Then, The Girl returns to her humble bunk, moving gingerly because of her injuries.



**The Allies push back-** A title card reads, “The Allies with fire and flame and souls of men win back inch by inch the sacred soil of France, righting her wrongs.” What follows is a montage of battlefield footage gathered by Griffith and his team while filming in France. British soldiers parade into a small town while French fighters carry heavy loads toward the trenches. After a high-up shot of men in the trenches, a title card reads, “Great Britain’s steel bulldogs bark their defiant protest.” Several large canons fire off in rapid succession. Another title card introduces the “eyes of the allies” before a shot of some bombard balloons. In the trenches, The Boy and Monsieur Cuckoo fight the Germans with special equipment: rifle-fired grenades. Using a grenade to threaten the opposing soldiers, The Boy rounds them up as prisoners of war.



**News of the village-** The Boy, who speaks German, acts as an interpreter for prisoners of war. Doing so, he overhears news from the village. Back in their dugout home, The Boy then tells the others from the village about what he’s heard. Back at the village inn, The Little Disturber wipes her tears on a tablecloth. The German-sympathizing inn owner appears and scolds her both for her tears and for wiping them on the tablecloth. As she leaves, The Little Disturber spits in her direction, getting a rise out of the other woman who works in the inn. They have a scuffle, and The Little Disturber runs her off. In their new home in a cellar, The Boy’s youngest brother imitates him, Wearing his hat and reading from a book. Back at the inn, The Little Disturber tells The Girl of a rumor that the French are massing for a counterattack. The same rumor ripples in the work camps. Alone in her room, The Girl strokes her photo of The Boy, still believing him dead, she says, “My love, my dead love, they are coming to save us. Don’t you hear—don’t you hear?”



**Hardships of trench life-** In his little hole in the ground, The Boy struggles to sleep. He looks at his photo of The Girl and remembers their time in her garden. Rats crawl over him and the other soldiers in the dugout. A title card appears, reading, “Von Strohm and friends, with the aid of entertainers, demonstrate the hardships of trench life for the higher officers.” A makeshift cabaret churns with activity as German officers drink and ogle dancing girls. In contrast, The Boy’s mother lies dying in her bed of some illness. His brothers cry as she takes her final breath, and they then begin the grim task of preparing a grave for her. Meanwhile, in the Cabaret, Von Strohm is complemented by the other officers on providing “Real ‘kultur’” on the battlefield. Sometime later, he tours the main line on inspection.



**Under cover of dark and rain-** A title card reads, “Under Cover of Dark and rain, The Boy reaches the enemies’ lines.” Crawling on his stomach, The Boy drags himself into the German trenches. His knowledge of the language adds to his officer’s disguise when he encounters German soldiers: “An Euren posten, verdammte Schwine!” (Back to your posts, swine!). However, he soon encounters officers who doubt his legitimacy. To get away from their persistent questioning, The Boy attacks them and flees, finding a hiding spot in a puddle above the trenches. Some soldiers claim to have killed him, and the officers accept their report, returning to their posts. A title card tells us The Boy stays in the hole for two days before sending up a signal flare for Allied guns to target.



**Von Strohm comes to the inn-** At the inn, The Girl sneaks into the kitchen to steal food for The Boy’s younger brothers. Outside the inn, Von Strohm arrives, his mess in the trenches closed. He can’t get in the front door, but a passing soldier recommends that he try the rear entrance. There, he runs into The Girl and her bag of food for the boys. A title card says Von Strohm has “a good memory for faces and ankles” before he begins flirting with The Girl. He opens the bag of food and



takes some, gesturing for her to serve him in the inn. There, he steals a bottle of beer from behind the counter while The Girl rouses the blind violinist. Still playing the part of a German officer, The Boy enters the village, confronting a patrolling soldier about his cigarette. Meanwhile, Von Strohm becomes more agitated as The Girl refuses his advances. He lies on the floor, motioning for her to join her. She tries to run away, but Von Strohm catches The Girl and tries to force himself on her, but he's interrupted. Some officers arrive outside and take Von Strohm away to the front on assignment.

**"The same wall"**- Wandering through the ruins of the town he once knew, The Boy comes to a sudden stop. "The same wall as—" a title card reads before the boy remembers the garden wall between him and the girl in a flashback. Back at the inn, The Girl collapses into a chair, exhausted. At the same time, Von Strohm returns with a cavalcade of fellow officers. Outside, The Boy creeps closer and closer to the inn while inside, The Girl gathers the food for the boys and hides a knife in her dress. Outside the inn, The Boy and The Girl nearly collide. Thinking he is a German officer, she cowers until she sees his face. Overcome by joy, grief, and disbelief, she falls into his arms. They're soon joined by The Little Disturber, who is equally surprised to see The Boy.



**Discord-** Since there are so many officers in the village, The Girl decides to try and hide The Boy in the inn. This puts him in harm's way when a German officer overhears him speaking to The Girl and attempts to take him prisoner. In the struggle, The Girl stabs the officer, who stumbles out into the hall. The Boy closes the door and takes a moment to recover before he and The Girl head back outside. The Allies begin shelling the town, and the two move up the outdoor staircase to hide in the upper rooms of the inn. The two sit down and begin eating the food The Girl stole for The Boy's younger brothers. Meanwhile, the stabbed German officer begins crawling toward the dining room, where Von Strohm eats and drinks beer.



**Crouched in waiting-** A title card reads: "The Allies, crouched waiting to attempt the rescue of the village." A montage of war footage crosses the screen as the Allies continue their bombardment. Trenches full of French and Allied soldiers wait for the signal before rushing across the great no-man's-land between them and the village. In response, the Germans unleash a gas attack. This does little to stall the French advance. Not until they encounter the recently constructed pillboxes near the entrance of the village does the French assault stop advancing. A brave soldier with a grenade makes quick work of this obstacle, allowing the other soldiers to get within spitting distance of the village. Monsieur Cuckoo rejoices, pointing at his lost home.



**Meeting death as man and wife-** After a shot of The Boy and The Girl holding each other in the upstairs room, a title card appears: "They pledge to meet death as man and wife." The Boy slides a wedding ring onto her finger after asking The Girl if she'll have him, and she clearly says, "I do." Downstairs, the wounded German officer stumbles into the dining room of the inn, Saluting Von Strohm before collapsing. Von Strohm draws a pistol and walks outside to get back up. Outside the village, the Allies fight on. Von Strohm returns to the inn with a group of soldiers who begin investigating, while the Allies outside the village suffer a loss as the Germans counterattack. A title card reads: "The sound of their own guns gives frantic hope." The Boy and The Girl hold each other close while British machine guns rattle outside the village.





**Locked out-** Recognizing the sound of the Allies' weapons, The Boy peaks out of the rear door while the Girl walks toward the indoor staircase, accidentally locking herself out of the room. The Boy is spotted and begins a life-or-death battle with a German soldier who charges into the room. Hearing the fight, The Girl turns to enter the room but finds the door locked. At almost the same time, Von Strohm marches up the stairs and finds her. "The spy!" he shouts, "Where is he?" He strangles The Girl for a moment, and she still refuses to say anything. Finding the door locked, Von Strohm pushes The Girl into the arms of a waiting soldier before heading downstairs to find a key. As he does so, The Boy finishes the soldier grappling with him by stabbing him with a bayonet. He exits the room and saves The Girl by shooting the soldier keeping her prisoner. The Boy pulls The Girl back into the room and locks the door again just as Von Strohm comes back up the stairs.



**Last kiss-** Bombs go off near the inn, blowing the doors on the ground floor in. The back-and-forth battle outside the village tips in the favor of the French, but the Germans' guns push them back. The Boy and The Girl cower, trapped in the room, while Von Strohm and his soldiers hammer against the door with the butts of their rifles. Downstairs, in a rage, The Little Disturber rushes outside to the place where the soldiers store their grenades, grabbing one and running back inside. As the door begins to splinter, The Boy and The girl hold each other passionately, kissing deeply. The Boy prepares to kill The Girl to keep her from the Germans before dying in battle, but The Little Disturber appears in the stairway, twisting the cap of the grenade and throwing it at Von Strohm's feet.



**Village reclaimed-** All seems lost again as more German soldiers begin pounding on the room's rear door. The Boy takes his pistol and fires through the door, killing one soldier, but another takes his place. Suddenly, the soldiers start falling: The French have finally broken through and are taking shots at the Germans in the village. Monsieur Cuckoo leads the charge into the village, proud to retake his home. Shots of the villager's faces flash on the screen, breaking up intense fighting scenes between the French and German soldiers. Soon, an American battalion joins the fray, swarming into the village. In the midst of the fighting, The Little Disturber and Monsieur Cuckoo are joyously reunited, kissing as the fighting goes on all around them. Soon, the village is reclaimed. The Villagers all rejoice, some jumping and hugging one another, others dropping to their knees in prayer. In the cellar where The Boy's family lives, The Boy is reunited with his brothers. They're all shocked to see the youngest brother lying in a pile of rubble, but after a moment, he stirs, unharmed. The joyous reunion becomes somber when the other brothers tell The Boy about the deaths of their mother and father.



**Happy times-** Sometime after the war, The Boy, The Girl, The Boy's brothers, The Little Disturber, and Monsieur Cuckoo all laugh and talk around a table in a restaurant. The Girl notices The Boy's new medals before the camera shifts, looking out a nearby window at a parade passing by. A title card reads: "America!—Returning home after freeing the world from Autocracy and the horrors of war—we hope forever and ever." The people in the restaurant jump up, waving American flags, while the parade passes outside. Monsieur Cuckoo jumps out of the window to greet a fellow soldier he knows who marches past. The camera centers on The Boy and The Girl, who look lovingly at one another as a halo of light shrouds them.



## THEMES

### Society

**Gender** We see gender represented in mostly traditional ways throughout *Hearts of the World*. There are a few points where this traditional view is assaulted by the realities of war, however. For instance, the men go off to fight while the old, young, and women fill their roles as best they can while the war is on. After the German invasion, the mostly female civilians behind enemy lines are press-ganged into service, working in garment factories, providing all forms of entertainment for the Germans, or laboring in harsh conditions in the fields to feed the enemy army. The Germans dehumanize these women and use them as a means to an end. In a slight return to the traditional representation, the film ends while the women in the village await rescue.

*Illustrative moment* The Little Disturber is a standout among the women portrayed in *Hearts of the World*. From her first appearance, she is boisterous and takes up a lot of space, much like the traditional portrayal of a man. Similarly, she takes the initiative with The Boy, perfuming herself and literally throwing herself into his arms in an attempt to court him. At the film's end, she takes initiative no other on-screen woman takes throughout the film: he decides to fight the Germans. In a moment of anger and desperation, she rushes outside and grabs a grenade from the German stores. Running back inside, she uncaps the grenade and hurls it toward Von Strohm who hammers away at the door, keeping him from The Boy and The Girl. In this way, The Little Disturber becomes a hero, taking on a role often reserved for men, both in coming to the rescue and in killing the enemy.



**Technology** At the beginning of the 20th century, many new inventions, applications for those inventions, and ever-increasing access to a global materials market generated more production at a larger scale than ever before. Not only were there new technologies emerging almost monthly, but those technologies developed only months or years before were being made bigger, faster, stronger, and more integrated with society than in previous centuries. We see this fascination with technology throughout the film as Griffith's camera captures the new gadgets used to fight the war in Europe. There are shots of giant mortars, gun emplacements, machine guns in use, gas attacks, high-explosive hand grenades, and new rolling stock in the form of tanks. People were fascinated by these developments as much as they were frightened by the war, increasing the draw to the theater when *Hearts of the World* was first released.

*Illustrative moment* In the build-up to the film's climax, Griffith takes another chance to showcase some of the footage he captured in a longer montage. He starts off showcasing the infantry of the different Allied nations, giving us close-ups of British and French soldiers marching to war. The montage soon turns to technology as the British "bulldog" guns and terrifying mustard gas take the screen. Not mentioned by name, a large cohort of tanks rumbles across the screen, flanked by marching soldiers. This conflict was the first application of tracked tanks in warfare, helping to mark the beginning of the modern age of war, with new usage of many technologies that are commonplace today. Notably absent in this montage are airplanes, though this omission may have been made for security reasons, as airplanes had only been developed in 1903 and were truly cutting edge.



### Justice

**Violence** As a film about war, *Hearts of the World* often centers on violence. While it is a central theme, the first acts of violence don't occur until almost the midpoint of the film. It does, however, throw us right in, showing us the sheer brutality of trench warfare. The violence continues for a while, interspersing real footage from the trenches between dramatic recreations, until The Boy is shot and left for dead during a charge. The violence is not limited to the battlefield. Many villagers die in German bombardments. After

pushing back the French, the Germans use violence to ensure their dominance as occupiers. They also use forced labor, another form of violence. In the context of war, violence is all that ends violence. Only through defeating the Germans in battle do the French and the Allies reclaim the village.

*Illustrative moment* In the first violent moment of the film, the German army charges the French trenches with fixed bayonets. While there are no special effects, the stark facial expressions of The Boy who stabs and clubs his opponents tell the intensity of the scene. This was one of many moments censored in some places like Chicago, as it was believed to be too violent. While this moment shows the courage and valor of The Boy, it also shows how the violence of war reduces the men who fight it to murder like frightened animals.



## Politics

**War** Specifically contracted by the British government as a war propaganda film, *Hearts of the World* has war at its center. The war's technology, cruelty, and suffering are on full display, and while Griffith does portray the Germans as a unique type of monster, his post-production sentiment was that "war is the real villain." We can see this even without the ham-fisted caricatures of Von Strohm and the other Germans. The film's beginning is pastoral and romantic, with an almost single-minded focus on the relationship between The Boy and The Girl. Villain (that it is, war) keeps the young couple from marriage and steals The Boy from The Girl in more ways than one. Wandering the battlefield after the first day's fighting, she finds her beloved unconscious with a grievous wound. The discovery drives her to further madness, already shell-shocked by the bombardment, into acting out a wedding march through the bombed-out streets of the village. Reunited at the film's end, The Girl and The Boy quickly marry before they face death. Von Strohm is going to stop The Boy's espionage through capture or death and, fearing Von Strohm's sexual advances, The Girl asks The Boy to kill her. War brings out the worst in people and forces them into desperation.

*Illustrative moment* Perhaps one of the clearest moments of war in the film comes when the Allies enter the war to help France. Griffith takes a long moment at the film's midpoint to showcase much of the footage he and his crew took in France during 1917. We're shown marching soldiers, retreating refugees, new British cannons and bombard balloons, and activities in the trenches. Not only does this moment showcase the propaganda purpose of the film, but it also showcases real battlefield footage not even journalists were permitted to obtain.



**Oppression** As the Germans sweep through eastern France, they begin taking the remaining civilians as prisoners to their camps. While after the Armistice, Germany was found to have committed or assisted in a number of war crimes, forced labor of civilians was not among them, and this fabrication was one that haunted Griffith for years to come, as his belief was "war is the real villain". While some of the oppression in the film is an artistic fabrication, it is very clear. No character in the film is really free of the German's oppression. In the best cases, they're being forced to fight a war to reclaim their home, while in the worst cases, they are literally enslaved to labor for the German war effort or entertain their officers.

*Illustrative moment* This moment is showcased in many posters for this film. When The Girl cannot lift a basket into a cart while being forced to work the fields, her German taskmaster begins beating her brutally with a cat-of-nine-tails whip. She falls to the ground, begging for mercy, as her captor revels in her suffering. While there are many small moments of oppression throughout *Hearts of the World*, this is one of the most striking and obvious.



## Psychology

**Suffering** All of Griffith's portrayals of war go hand in hand with suffering. *Hearts of the World* is no different. The suffering comes quickly for the villagers, as those who remain when the German assault begins start losing loved ones in the bombardment. When the Germans take over, almost everyone is forced to work, and they begin to starve as their captors hoard food and luxuries. Characters like The Girl and The Little Disturber suffer greatly from being separated from their lovers. It even drives The Girl to madness.

*Illustrative moment* The Boy's Mother and younger brothers survive the initial German invasion, but the work and lack of food push their mother too far. She eventually dies, leaving the boys to fend for themselves. Adding to the suffering, the young boys are tasked with burying their mother.



**Grief** Often combined with the themes of war and suffering, grief is a constant throughout the film's second half. Each person shown in the film suffers a loss. Some lose their home or are separated from their family by war, while others witness the death of their loved ones or find them dead. The Little Disturber is driven to violent rage by her grief, while others like The Boy's brothers and The Girl suffer through depression, The Girl so much that she has a mental breakdown.

*Illustrative moment* After the first night's bombardment and fighting, The Girl in a shell-shocked stupor wanders through the battlefield in her wedding dress, acting out a wedding march. Eventually, she stumbles on The Boy lying unconscious. Having been shot during a charge, he managed to drag himself toward the village. She spends the night there with him in her madness, dreaming of their honeymoon that never came. The next morning, she wakes up with her faculties intact and realizes where she is and who she is lying on. Unable to rouse The Boy, she assumes him dead and has another mental breakdown, running for the village where The Little Disturber cares for her in her grief-stricken madness.



## Change

**Transience** War makes the transience of human existence all the more clear. Not only do people die, landscapes are changed, sometimes irreparably, and towns are demolished in the fighting. We see the village transformed from a pastoral dreamscape to a bombed-out shell and then a forced labor camp and wartime administration center. It only takes a moment for these changes to occur, and the grief and nostalgia these changes evoke are shown in the film's many characters.

*Illustrative moment* The strongest moment of thematic transience in *Hearts of the World* comes when The Boy infiltrates the village disguised as a German officer. While creeping toward the inn, the center of German operations in the occupied village, The Boy notices a familiar sight. It's the wall between his family's yard and The Girl's garden. Stricken by grief at this moment of recognition and fearful of what the destruction of his home means for those he loves, The Boy falls to his knees, crying against the ruined wall.



## Ethics\

**Patriotism** Patriotism plays an interesting role in *Hearts of the World*. Contracted in part by the British government, Griffith seeks to attach typical American patriotism to broader European patriotism in order to garner support for the American part in the war effort. Because the film is set in Europe and meant to portray the French as heroic, see relatively few actual displays of American patriotism until the film's end,



where a victory parade is shown and all the Allies march triumphantly and wave their nation's flags. Despite being an American citizen and holding onto the trappings of American patriotism, such as a small flag he keeps beside his picture of The Girl, The Boy happily joins the French army to defend his new home. While their patriotism is a bit more subdued, Monsieur Cuckoo and the other men from the village fight with patriotism in mind: they are defending their homeland and reclaiming their village.

*Illustrative moment* The most obvious moment of patriotism in *Hearts of the World* comes when war is first declared. Despite his American citizenship, The Boy declares that he is joining the French army to defend his home. Having fallen in love with a French girl, he says that “the land that is good enough to live in is good enough to fight for.” He is seen marching proudly to the front line with his neighbors and fellow soldiers to defend his new home. This transference of patriotic fever to another country is a rare thing to see portrayed in an American film, and something Griffith hoped to instill in his audience.



**Solidarity** World War I was unique in terms of multinational solidarity. Both the Allies and the Central Powers were made up of nations from across multiple continents, creating multiple theaters of war in Europe, Asia, and Africa. While the non-European theaters resemble the ongoing colonial scuffles between European empires, there was incredible operational and patriotic solidarity between the Allied powers in France. At many points, Griffith tries to persuade Americans to feel solidarity, using emotional portrayals of the villagers' lives being upturned and the injustice of the villainous Germans.

*Illustrative moment* The greatest display of propagandist solidarity comes at the film's end. Here, Griffith imagines a postwar celebration, praising America's fighting men and political will for helping to end such a terrible conflict. French, American, and British soldiers march side by side as hundreds of onlookers shout joyously and wave flags of the three nations. The main characters of the film join in, too, all dining in celebration of The Boy's many awards for bravery. This final moment ends with a shot of The Boy and The Girl shrouded in angelic light. With their marriage, they are a perfect symbol of French/American solidarity.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Boy – This unnamed American is the son of an artist living in a small French village. He falls in love with the girl living next door, but their plans to marry are interrupted by the outbreak of WWI. Despite being an American, The Boy goes on to fight with the French military to defend his new home.

*Brave* We are shown the boy's bravery in warfare often. The first war scenes in the film show the boy fighting off dozens of Germans almost single-handedly, allowing him to live long enough to regroup even as his comrades fall. He is shown helping a wounded soldier before a charge and then rallying his neighbors during a counterattack before he is shot. After recovering from his wound, The Boy is redeployed in a special operation to infiltrate enemy lines. With his knowledge of the language, The Boy poses as a German lieutenant and manages to get behind enemy lines and set off a flare. With the success of the operation, he continues to pose as a German officer, making his way into the village. There he finds The Girl and they are forced into a desperate defense when an actual German officer unveils him as an American. He is forced into fierce hand-to-hand combat with German soldiers to defend The Girl and his own life.

*Loyal* Loyalty is a strong quality in The Boy. This is by design, intended as propaganda that would encourage America's young men to sign up for service. As noted above in the themes, The Boy is willing to lay down his life for France even though he is an American citizen. His love for The Girl and his home propel him into voluntary service in the French army, as “the land that is good enough to live in is good enough to fight for.” It takes great loyalty for The Boy to agree to the special mission behind enemy lines.

It's one thing to fight in a war; it's another thing entirely to willingly walk into the lion's den. He is intensely loyal to The Girl, shown in his agreement to kill her to keep her from falling into the German's hands.

The Girl - The Girl is a young woman living in a small town in rural France. She falls in love with the eldest son of the American family next door, but their romance is interrupted by war. After finding The Boy wounded and unconscious on the battlefield near her home, she loses her mind and is nursed back to health by The Little Disturber.

*Emotional* The Girl is shown to be quite emotional throughout the film. While part of this is Lillian Gish's trademark expressive technique, the majority of The Girl's emotional behavior is a direct response to the effects of the war. She is overjoyed to be marrying The Boy, so she is obviously crushed when he must leave before they can wed and even more so when the fighting begins on the day they planned their wedding. While some characters respond fearfully to their shell shock, The Girl becomes "deranged," regressing to a childlike state and acting out a wedding march across the bombed-out town and battlefield. When she discovers The Boy and assumes he is dead, she suffers an emotional breakdown that leaves her bedridden.

*Loyal* Much like The Boy, The Girl is incredibly loyal. Wishing they could be wed before he leaves for the front, the thought of marrying The Boy preoccupies her mind in his absence. This comes up when she suffers from shell shock, wearing her wedding dress as she mindlessly wanders the battlefield. In her fragile state, she recognizes the boy lying unconscious along the road and lies down with him in a version of a honeymoon, spending the night sleeping on the battlefield with her "husband." Even though she believes him dead the next morning, she keeps him in her thoughts and still speaks to his picture as if he is alive. As with The Boy, Griffith tries to portray a feminine version of loyalty to inspire America's women to similar feelings.

Von Strohm – First described as a 'tourist' in scare quotes, Von Strohm is a German intelligence officer and the main antagonist of the film. After the invasion, he rules over the village with an iron fist, constantly seeking food, drink, and sex. When not "administrating" in the village, Von Strohm spends most of his time rubbing elbows with higher officers.

*Corrupt* Like any caricature, Von Strohm is shown to have many overtly negative traits. Key among them is his corrupting influence. Early in the film, he is shown giving bribes or some sort of payment to the woman who runs the end. He compounds this later, giving her another stack of bills when the Germans take the village, some sort of reward for her assistance. Later in the film, his corrupt attitude shows him shirking his duty to eat and drink, and still later he begins to demand sexual favors from The Girl, chasing her down and striking her when she refuses. His corrupt actions are compounded when officers outside call him to the front, and he puts on a show of military etiquette for them as if he was not trying to assault a woman just moments before.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does *Hearts of the World* compare to other American war propaganda films? In what ways does the elaborate international production add to the film?
2. Do you agree or disagree with Griffith's post-film assessment that "war is the real villain"? How does this sentiment compare with his previous war films, like *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*?
3. How often did you notice the real shots of the trenches in France? Could you tell the difference between them and the recreations shot in California?