

A HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

BARRY LYNDON (1975)

Stanley Kubrick

OVERVIEW Four years after *A Clockwork Orange*, Kubrick adapted another novel (Thackeray's 19th-century classic *Barry Lyndon*) and, once again, used a narrator to tell us the story of a upwardly-mobile Irish farm boy. For the first time, though, the director looked back instead of forward, but again produced a magnificent film, sumptuous in its visuals, both lavish interior shots and serene countryside locations. It was, therefore, fitting that John Alcott won the Academy Award for Best Cinematography. As always, Kubrick was meticulous in his research on period costume, house interiors and local speech. The film did not do well at the box-office but received extensive critical praise in Europe. At more than three hours long, some people found it slow, but for others its languid nostalgia drew them into the atmosphere of a world long since past.

SYNOPSIS Barry Redmond, a young man in rural Ireland in the eighteenth century, wants to climb the social ladder. Jilted by his own cousin, who chooses an English officer for a husband, Barry challenges the man to a duel. Thinking he has killed the Englishman, Barry flees before the police investigate. After a series of adventures as a soldier in the Seven Years War, and later as a spy for the Prussian government, he forms a partnership with an Irish gambler named Chevalier. Rising up in society, Barry meets and later weds Lady Lyndon, but makes an enemy of Bullingdon, her son by her first and now deceased husband. Barry squanders the estate's money in attempting to bribe his way to a peerage and is stopped in his tracks by the death of his young son, Bryan. Bullingdon, his stepson, tracks him down, challenges him to a duel, which Barry deliberately loses and suffers an amputated leg. He is then packed off to the continent with a pension provided by Bullingdon and Lady Lyndon.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Barry	Barry Redmond (later Lyndon) is a young Irish lad.
Nora	Nora is his fickle cousin.
Mrs Redmond	She is Barry's mother.
Quin	Capt. Quin is an English officer who marries Nora.
Grogan	Capt. Grogan is a family friend.
Lady Lyndon	Lady Lyndon, a widow, becomes Barry's wife.
Bullingdon	Lord Bullingdon is her older son by her first marriage.
Bryan	Bryan is her younger son and Barry's only son.
Chevalier	Chevalier is an Irish gambler whom Barry befriends.

STORY

YOUTH

Barry A narrator sets the scene by describing rural Ireland in the mid-eighteenth century. Barry Redmond's father has been killed in a duel over a horse deal and his mother decided not to marry and to dedicate her life to her only son. The first scene shows young Redmond playing cards with his older cousin Nora, who toys with his passion for her.

John Quin Nora shifts her attentions to the Englishman John Quin, an officer in the British Army, which makes Barry jealous. Barry is saddened because Quin is more mature, richer and of higher status than he. When Quin discovers Nora's earlier flirtation with Barry, he threatens to withdraw his interest but is persuaded by Nora's brothers that Barry is not a true rival. When the engagement between Nora and Quin is announced at a family banquet, Barry throws a glass of wine in Quin's face. Now, the family is afraid that Quin will cancel his offer of marriage and the large sum of money that he has pledged to give the family in order to pay off their debts.

Duel When Barry will not back down from Quin, a duel is arranged between them. By the riverside, with birds chirping in the trees, the rivals for Nora are handed pistols and face each other at ten paces. After Quin falls and is declared dead, Barry flees to Dublin to avoid the authorities.

British soldier During the journey, his gold coins and horse are taken from him by thieves. Resuming his travels on foot, a penniless Barry comes across a recruitment fair and, induced by the salary, becomes a soldier in the British army. Insulted by another soldier, Barry taunts him and the matter is settled by arranging a boxing match, which ends with a victorious Barry.

Revelations While serving in the army, Barry runs into Capt. Grogan, who was his second during the duel with Quin. Over a drink, Grogan tells him that John Quin is alive and married to Nora. The duel, he explains, was faked. Barry's pistol was only loaded with ash and Quin pretended to die. It was a ruse cooked up by Nora's brothers so that Barry would flee and let them enjoy the money that Quin gave them as brothers-in-law.

Desertion Soon, Barry's regiment sails to Germany to fight against the French in the Seven Years War. In their first battle, Grogan dies in Barry's arms. Disillusioned, Barry deserts but not before stealing an officer's uniform, horse and identification papers.

Love affair Having escaped, Barry meets a young German woman whose husband is yet to return from the war. She takes pity on Barry and takes him to her house and feeds him. The two lonely people become lovers for a brief time.

Prussian soldier Continuing his journey, hoping to return to England, Barry runs into a Prussian officer, who discovers that Barry is an imposter. Now Barry is given a choice: he can be shot as a deserter or become a soldier in the Prussian army. Barry joins the Prussian army, fights in battles and is decorated by Frederick the Great for saving the life of the Prussian officer who earlier had seen through his disguise.

Prussian spy After the war is over, Barry is hired by the Prussian government to report on the activities of an Irish gambler in Berlin named Chevalier, who is suspected of being a spy for the Austrians. Barry is given a backstory and told to inveigle himself into the gambler's household as a servant. Impressed by Chevalier's grandeur and overcome by affection for a compatriot, Barry reveals his true identity to his compatriot. Chevalier is likewise affected and the two Irish exiles form a friendship.

Escape Barry continues in his disguise as a spy and reports his findings to the Prussians. With his keen eyesight, he also assists Chevalier in cheating his opponents at cards. When Chevalier is accused of defrauding an influential prince and threatened with a duel, the Prussians seize the opportunity to escort Chevalier out of their country. Knowing this, and taking advantage of his position as a double agent, Barry disguises himself as Chevalier and is safely taken across the border. He meets up with Chevalier, whom he had arranged to escape in the middle of the night.

Across Europe The two Irishmen form a partnership as gamblers who enjoy the good life, visiting various spas and chateaus across the continent. If any of Chevalier's playing partners was late paying his debt, Barry's excellent swordsmanship persuaded him to hand over the cash. Realising that he must marry money, Barry sets his sights on the Countess of Lyndon.

Seduction and death The only problem is that she is already married, to Sir Charles Lyndon. Fortunately, Charles is frail and confined to a wheelchair. Barry first seduces her and then provokes her jealous husband into convulsions that prove fatal.

MARRIAGE

Marriage Barry marries the widowed Countess and becomes Mr Lyndon. They take up residence in London, where Barry lives the life of a wealthy gentleman. His step-son, little Lord Bullingdon, however, realises that the marriage is a loveless sham, conducted solely for financial reasons. He is sad that his mother has made a fool of herself by falling for a 'common opportunist'. Soon another

son, Bryan, is born to Lady Lyndon, while Barry carouses with whores and maid servants. Lady Lyndon suffers his indiscretions and infidelities without complaint.

Family war Lord Bullingdon insults Barry in public by refusing to accept him as his father. Barry whips him, as he has seen done to army deserters, and threatens him with more if the little boy doesn't accept him. As Bullingdon grows, so does his hatred for Barry. In compensation, Barry's own son, Bryan, is devoted to him. Barry is also heartened by his mother, who arrives from Ireland to live with him on the estate.

Social climbing One day, she tells Barry that his future is in jeopardy if Lady Lyndon were to divorce or predecease him. Then all the money would go to Bullingdon and leave him without a penny. The solution, she suggests, is to become a lord with a title. One of Barry's old friends recommends that he befriend Lord Wendover, who can put him forward for a peerage. Barry also invests a lot of money (mostly bribes) in his pursuit for a title and makes progress in that direction. In one scene, he is introduced to King George.

Disaster Finding that Bullingdon has been unkind to Bryan, Barry whips the older boy, after which Bullingdon declares that he will kill him if he does it again. Then, social disaster strikes, when Barry is publicly insulted by Bullingdon during a concert. After the young man lists his misdemeanours, Barry assaults him, creating a scene so scandalous that Barry loses all the influence he has so carefully cultivated up to that point. He is shunned by society, but learns that, at least, Bullingdon has left the country. To compound his worries, though, all the bills he ran up in his lost cause for a peerage now fall due. His only solace is his loving relationship with his son, Bryan.

Death Bryan asks his father if he could have a horse, and not a pony, for his ninth birthday. Barry indulges him, but the boy is injured in an accident and lies in bed for two days. In a heart-rending scene at the sick bed, the boy dies with his parents grieving over him.

Grief Barry seeks refuge in drink, while his wife turns to religion. Barry's mother now takes over management of the estate and dismisses the reverend-tutor in an effort to cut expenses. She also believes that the reverend is partly responsible for Lady Lyndon's deteriorating mental condition. Soon after he leaves, Lady Lyndon attempts suicide but only suffers illness from the poison she drinks.

Second duel When Bullingdon learns about the estate's finances and his mother's mental state, he returns to England. Finding Barry drunk in a tavern, Bullingdon demands satisfaction for the beating he received during the concert, years earlier. During the duel, Barry deliberately fires into the ground when given a clear chance to kill his opponent. Despite this magnanimous act, Bullingdon says he has not received satisfaction. As such, he is entitled to shoot again, and Barry is badly wounded in the leg.

Humiliation During Barry's recovery from an amputated leg, Bullingdon goes to the estate and assumes control. He dispatches a messenger to Barry offering a large yearly income if he goes abroad and renounces any link to the family. Knowing that without this income he will land in prison for non-payment of debts, Barry accepts and limps away in humiliation.

Departure Barry returns to Ireland with his mother and then travels alone to Europe, where he once again takes up gambling. Keeping his side of the bargain with Bullingdon, he never goes back to England. In the final shot, we see Lady Lyndon, with Bullingdon by her side, signing his annual cheque. She is overcome by memories but does not speak.

THEMES

Social class The driving force behind the rambling plot of this story is the power of the class system. It is the story of Barry Redmond, a rural Irish lad without prospects, who strives to become Barry Lyndon, a wealthy gentleman in England. That aspiration has three related aspects: money, nationality (English/British) and status (a title of nobility). The fact that farm boy Barry lacks all three propels him on his string of adventures, which lead to temporary success but end in total failure. His

desire to improve his fortunes is stoked into a fire of passion when he is slighted by his cousin Nora and her family in selecting another man to be her husband. His rival is John Quin, older, richer and with status than he. Plus, he is an Englishman. Smarting from this humiliation, Barry insults Quin in public, leading to a duel, which ends with him fleeing and joining the army himself. This is just the first of many events in his picaresque life fuelled by his obsession to better himself. Later, he will arrange a loveless marriage to gain money and spend it all in further attempts to climb the social ladder by obtaining a peerage, or royal title, inherited or conferred by the English monarch. Barry comes achingly close to achieving that aim when he is introduced to King George III. Throughout the film, though, he is opposed by his step-son, Bullingdon, who refers to Barry as an upstart, a commoner and an opportunist. IN the end, it is Lord Bullingdon, the blueblood nobleman who inherited his title, who proves the undoing of the aspirational farm boy. Despite Barry's persistent struggle, at times heroic and at times debauched, the commoner limps off in the final scenes, humiliated, maimed and surviving only on a pension granted by Lord Bullingdon. He strove hard but could not escape his class origins.

Money Running in parallel with social class is the importance of money. It both plagues and assists Barry at nearly every step of his climbing up and falling down the social ladder. Even before the story begins, his father is killed in an argument over money concerning a horse. Then, in the first major event in the story, Barry loses out in wooing cousin Nora because the rival Englishman Quin has pledged to pay off the family's debts. Fleeing from the police after his duel with Quin, he is robbed of his money and joins the army because it provides a modest but stable salary. His fortunes rise when he helps his Irish friend Chevalier win large amounts at the gaming table. And, most important of all, since Barry cannot inherit a title, he purchases one in the shape of Lady Lyndon. Much later, having squandered most of the estate's money on his social uplift strategy, he is forced to accept Lord Bullingdon's offer of a pension if he leaves the country. He loses in love because he has no money; he marries in order to acquire money; he spends all his money as a means to obtain status; and, finally, he loses status because he has no money.

Gender: masculinity One of Kubrick's favourite themes is masculinity, usually the toxic variety, and this is true of *Barry Lyndon*. Again, this theme is related to the other two, for Barry wants to become a gentleman, which means a person of status and money. The importance of 'being a man' is emphasised in the early scenes when cousin Nora dismisses him as a 'mere boy' in front of his English rival John Quin. His pride wounded by such a remark, Barry tries to prove his manhood by challenging Quin to a duel (similar to the contests among gladiators in *Spartacus* and the boxing match in *Killer's Kiss*). There are, in fact, two duels in the film, plus a boxing match and sword fighting, too. As in *Paths of Glory*, Barry also distinguishes himself on the battlefield, helping his friend (who later dies) and saving the life of a Prussian general. Barry acquits himself well in all these exhibitions of masculine qualities. In fact, he shows his real worth when he honourably fires into the ground instead of killing Bullingdon in the second duel. Bullingdon, by contrast, is shown to be a coward in their duel. Although Barry is no match for his rivals when the competition involves money or social status, he comes out on top when the competition is physical.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Barry Lyndon As the titular character, Barry dominates the story, which proceeds in three stage: from Barry Redmond to Barry Lyndon and back to Barry Redmond. He is a complex figure—boastful, affectionate, scurrilous, brave, deceitful and honourable. His origins as an Irish farm boy define him, for that is the thing he seeks to leave behind and become a gentleman. He is certainly not a hero, but he is at times admirable. He gains our sympathy as the underdog, fighting for recognition against a rigid social hierarchy and arrogant aristocracy.

Proud In the first part of the film, we see that Barry has pride and a quick temper. These qualities are illustrated clearly in an early sequence involving him, Nora, Quin and Nora's brothers. She has flirted with him, but now she is attracted to Quin, the British army officer with status and money. Nora and Quin are standing on a green slope of grass with an inlet of the sea in the background. Angered and hurt, Barry confronts Nora with the ribbon that she had once hidden in her bosom for him to find. The next day, he suffers the indignity of being present at a family banquet where Quin is announced as Nora's fiancé. He glowers at Quin's smug smile and keeps quiet while the toast is made to the affianced couple. Quin kisses Nora amid clapping and appreciative comments from the guests. But

Barry's face grows ever angrier. When the others sit down, he rises with a smirk and says, 'Here's is my toast to your Mr Quin,' whereupon he throws a glass in his rival's face. All through this scene we watch the emotions play across his own face, pride, humiliation and vengeance. It is an early indication of the proud hothead known as Barry Redmond/Lyndon.

Determined Barry is determined to get his revenge, not just by throwing a glass but by shooting in a duel. The next day, we see Barry walking through the countryside with Capt. Grogan, who advises him to give up his claim on Nora. The family, he points out, needs the money Quin brings to the marriage. Besides, the man says, your uncle (Nora's father) has treated him and his mother well. 'Is this the way to repay your uncle for letting you stay in his house rent-free?' Barry cannot deny his uncle's charity, but he is firm in his objective. 'I will fight the man who pretends the hand of Nora,' he says. 'I'll follow him, even into the church if need be. I'll have his blood, or he'll have mine.' In other words, he wants to fight him in a duel. Capt. Grogan is dismayed but impressed by his firm decision. Barry may be misguided by wounded pride, but he will not back down from a rival.

Affectionate Another admirable quality in the otherwise disreputable Barry is his genuine affection for his son, Bryan. As the narrator explains, Barry was a good father, who indulged his son and held high hopes for his future. The best example of his love is the scene at the dining table when his son asks him if he has bought a horse for him. Little Bryan has said he wanted such a gift for his birthday and Barry was non-committal but secretly bought it for him as a surprise. In the middle of eating, Bryan, who has been tipped off by a stable boy, pipes up. 'Papa, did you buy the horse?' he asks. Barry tries to maintain the secret but Bryan sees through him. The boy runs to his father, throws his arms around his neck and thanks him. The father kisses his son and the two of them hug each other in a tableau as beatific as a religious painting of the holy family. Barry treats his wife abominably, and whips his step-son for disobedience, but to his own son he is a loving and tender father.

Honourable But perhaps the defining moment of Barry's character is the duel with Lord Bullingdon toward the end of the film. Bullingdon demands 'satisfaction' for the whipping given him by his step-father, and Barry (broken by grief over Bryan's death) cannot refuse. In this duel, a coin is tossed to determine who has the first shot. A nervous Bullingdon wins the toss but his pistol misfires when he cocks it, and Barry is unharmed. Despite the misfire, the rules are that Barry now has his opportunity to fire at Bullingdon, who is visibly quaking. Barry is composed, he's been a soldier, and could surely kill his opponent, but he deliberately points his pistol at the ground and fires. Here is the action of a gentleman, a man of honour, who will not take advantage of his opponent's weakness. This is the twist at the end of this clever film. It is Barry, the despised commoner, who displays the qualities of a lord.

Bullingdon Lord Bullingdon, who is Barry's step-son, is also a complex character. He is arrogant and proud, loyal to his mother and protective of their family estate. It seems best to view him as Barry's alter ego, for he shares many of Barry's qualities, except that they are less sympathetic in a person of high status and wealth.

Proud A good illustration of the way Bullingdon is paired with Barry is that he, too, is a proud man. Just as Barry is determined to climb the social ladder, Bullingdon is determined to defend his mother and the family name. We see this in the first scene in which he speaks. He is a young boy, riding in a carriage with his tutor. Arms crossed, brow creased, he pouts. In answer to the tutor's question about his glum expression, he says that his mother should not have remarried and not so soon. 'And certainly not to this man,' he adds, 'who is a common opportunist.' The little boy is perceptive enough to see that Barry has married his mother not for love but for money. 'It hurts me,' he says, 'to see my mother make a fool of herself.' From that moment, and to the end of the film, Bullingdon dedicates himself to ridding the family of the upstart farm boy. Although there is a whiff of priggishness in the young boy's personality, he is proud of his family heritage.

Brash When he is a few years older, Bullingdon takes his attack on his step-father into the public sphere. As a large audience listens to a classical music concert in the family house, he enters with his young brother who is wearing Bullingdon's big shoes. Bullingdon smirks as the clatter of the shoes on the wooden floor disturbs the formal atmosphere of the concert. But his disruption goes much further than noise. When the musicians stop, he draws himself up and, addressing his mother and the audience, denounces Barry Lyndon. 'It is not only the lowness of his birth and the brutality of his manners that disgust me,' he says, 'but the shameful nature of his conduct toward your ladyship

[you, my mother]. And his swindling of my property.' Bullingdon's speech is like a prosecution lawyer laying out the case against the accused in court. It is a brash, but effective, intervention that sows the seeds of Barry's eventual fall from grace. Here, too, Bullingdon behaves just as Barry did, earlier when he insulted his rival at the family dinner table.

Coward One scene, however, illustrates the gulf that separates these two main characters. This is the duel at the end of the story, when Bullingdon seeks compensation for his ill treatment at the hands of his step-father. He wants to eliminate the Irishman in the only way that is publicly acceptable: by killing him in a duel. But when the moment comes, when he wins the coin toss and has an opportunity to shoot the defenceless rival, he is overcome with fright. His lip trembles, his arm shakes and his pistol misfires. Now, he is asked if he 'is ready to receive Mr Lyndon's fire.' Again, his whole body is agitated and he vomits from the fear in the pit of his stomach. The men watching bow their heads, wishing not to witness his humiliation. The whimpering Bullingdon is only saved by the compassion of Barry, who chooses not to fire at him. The two men are paired throughout the film, as rivals for Lady Lyndon's attentions, as rivals for control of the family estate, and here, at the end, in a duel. Lord Bullingdon does not behave like a gentleman. He shows himself to be a coward.

Lady Lyndon The only other substantial character in the film is Lady Lyndon, who forms an awkward triangle, joining Barry and Bullingdon. She falls in love with Barry at their first meeting and remains loyal to him and his son, Bryan. She acts always with composure, displaying her aristocratic background. While the men and boys around her might react emotionally and physically to insults and humiliations, she remains silent, her eyes unwavering, her emotions under control. In the few moments when she does express herself, she displays her maternal instinct and her dignity. If she suffers, as we suspect she does, it is silently.

Dignified Lady Lyndon is a product of her class upbringing, a faithful wife, devoted mother and charming, if nearly silent, hostess. She cannot and will not oppose her husband in public, or draw attention to herself, but in private she is allowed a modicum of expression. One brief but revealing scene occurs shortly after her marriage to Barry, when she is riding along next to him in a carriage. Once, then twice, she waves away the smoke from his pipe. A third time and then she finally speaks. 'Redmond, do you mind not smoking for a while,' she says softly. He ignores her plea and blows the next exhalation of smoke directly into her face. He smiles at her, as if to say, 'Take that, Lady whatever your name!' She does not react, says nothing and turns away. This is a woman trained to forbear male behaviour, a titled woman who would find it unbecoming to question her husband. For the same reason, she will later ignore his public infidelities. Is she angry? Is she jealous? We don't know because Lady Lyndon is a woman of dignity, for whom silent forbearance is preferable to public expressions of displeasure.

Maternal She breaks emotional cover only once in this long film, during the chaos created at the concert by Lord Bullingdon. She is playing the piano accompaniment when her older son disrupts the event and insults his step-father. Suddenly, Lady Lyndon rises and puts her arms around Bryan, the younger son. 'From the way I love this child, my lord,' she says to Bullingdon, 'you ought to know how I would have loved his elder brother had he proved worthy of any mother's affection.' It is an impassioned speech, illustrating her sincere love for Bryan, her son by Barry. And it is an equally painful speech because she has to criticise Bullingdon, her son by her deceased first husband. She is a mother, torn in two, but a mother nevertheless.

Suffering In the final scene, Lady Lyndon and Lord Bullingdon have been reconciled. Barry has been paid off to leave the country, and the estate has returned to the status quo ante. The opportunist has been exiled, the finances stabilised. We watch in silence as mother and son sit at a desk to pay monthly bills and check the accounts. With smooth rhythm, Bullingdon reads the invoices and his mother writes the cheques. There is only a slight intake of breath as she hesitates before signing a cheque payable to Barry Redmond. The final shot shows her face, composed as ever, yet somehow expressing the suffering she has endured.



(Barry Lyndon contemplates his future)



(Barry Lyndon with his wife, Lady Lyndon)



(Bullingdon disrupts the concert)