

SINCE YOU WENT AWAY

Directed by John Cromwell
Produced by David O. Selznick
Distributed by United Artists
Released in 1944

Melodrama gets a bad rap.
But why?

The word 'melodrama' pertains to expressions that are "overly" sentimental. Melodrama is overly sentimental only for those who don't care for sentiment at all, or like it in bite-sized portions.

Looking at things from the critic's perspective, is a melodrama an example of too much of a good thing? Maybe, but have you ever heard someone say that a comedy was too funny or a thriller too suspenseful? No. And so a melodrama can only go too far when the piling on of wrenching emotion interferes with suspension of disbelief. It's not a problem of genre, but believability.

The inimical word 'sentiment' is pulled between disparate meanings—one is *exaggerated, maudish emotion*, and the other *feelings of tenderness*. For some cynics even the latter is objectionable.

Why? What's the objection to sentimental dramas?

Is it a jaundiced view of human nature, a preference for realism and grittiness, an aversion to the popular? (They would say 'plebian.')

Is it embarrassment? Or is it a negative view of one's self (either acquired or inflicted), projected onto the whole world in order to drag it down, too?

Since You Went Away is sentimental and, for our purposes, melodramatic. But many Americans enduring World War II at home were feeling the same things. They too rode the roller coaster of juxtaposed tragedy and triumph. Therefore this film is real and gritty. But you'd never hear *them* say that...unless they lived through it, too.

All the touchstones are hit—driving restrictions, victory gardens, hoarding/rationing/the black market, war bonds, housing shortages, overburdened trains, salvage drives, Red Cross volunteering, defense plant work, and nylon shortages and egg shortages and shortages of every other kind—except for caring.

The movie is a time capsule of its era and it feels like a foreign country, this America with spunky black maids, telegrams, girls in dresses, news delivered by movie screen, double beds for married folk, gin rummy, booze on the sideboard, asking permission to smoke as evidence of effeminate solicitousness, furious letter writing, WACS, and WAVES.

Of course, some things don't change. Consider the dance, where the girls are ogled by greedy-eyed men hollering approval. It's a more restrained version of today's wet t-shirt contests.

Less disconcerting, extended families still play games at Christmas gatherings; America remains a shining light to the broken denizens of a world trapped in shadow; men see war, still,

as a call to glory and/or sacrifice; and girls, dreaming of husbands unknown, still obsess over, and find self-worth in, their looks.

Heralding the story's aspirations for dark verisimilitude, the photography is characterized by high contrast lighting and deep shadows. The screenplay makes some subversive suggestions. Tony is the best character and the film is strongest when he's around to provide an injection of masculinity and to serve, unnervingly, as a husband substitute. Especially with Tim missing in action it seems Tony can prevail on Anne for some intimate attention. After all, M.I.A. usually translates to D.O.A. Their sexual tension is bold and refreshing for a movie that starts off looking to be nothing more than high-gloss propaganda. What we have here is family-drama film noir.

The Colonel Smollett character is another welcome surprise. At first it seems his stuck-up boorishness will get him thrown out of the house. Then, with moving the fish tank, undergarments on the showed rod, and the plant in the sink, it seems like Shirley Temple's Brig wants to make life for the colonel intolerable like the twins did to Vicky in *The Parent Trap*.

But no—not only does he stay, he becomes a surrogate father and valued confidant. It's touching to see how the three girls' love for him breaks down his icy resolve and forces him to reconsider his philosophy of life, particularly as it pertains to his grandson, Bill.

The screenplay, in addition to the rich characterizations of Tony and Colonel Smollett, takes more unexpected turns. The double entendre of Tony's recruiting poster ("Come on In") seems quite risqué for 1944, and it's a subtle nod to Claudette Colbert's sexpot days as a DeMille star and her famous hitchhiking stratagem in *It Happened One Night*.

Before Bill leaves we're treated to a vignette giving us a snapshot of wartime America outside the Hilton home. (It's a recurring device through the film.) Here we see a soldier stolidly bid goodbye to his love, discouraging her from looking back as she walks away. The joke is, a minute later he performs the same gesture of self-sacrifice with another girl! This moment is important for its leavening humor and because it best encapsulates the film's refusal to make angels out of all Americans; like the food-hording, high-living widower played deftly by Agnes Moorehead, it wasn't every citizen putting the community's needs first.

In a third surprise, after Bill is gone, it seems that Jane's loss will be remedied in the person of battle-scarred Danny. Lest Jane's grief seem inconsequential and Bill's impact forgotten, they, appropriately, just remain friends.

As realized by the highly-regarded Robert Walker, Bill is a little weak, but harbors great anger and resolve. His joy at winning a beauty like Jennifer Jones is compelling.

And his departure is the best scene of the movie. It's the iconic rendition of an iconic moment—a girl chasing a departing train with tears in her eyes as she bids her lover farewell. The scene greatly benefits by Max Steiner's Oscar-winning score.

As the lovebirds approach the tracks and kiss for the last time, the score is all yearning and high strings. As the train begins to chug away Steiner switches to minor and sets up a bass ostinato that, as it jumps to a higher register, mimics the increasing speed of the train, while the high strings, representing Jane, remain plaintive and unyielding. As the train conveys Bill out of shouting distance, the trombones, aping the train whistle, mock Jane with pitiless scorn.

Then we get to the real chiller—she looks at the watch that Bill has just handed her for safe-keeping. It's the watch his grandfather inscribed, and she reads, "To William G. Smollett, 2nd/Who will lead Men to Glory on the Battlefield." Since Bill has already predicted his death (in the short neighborhood walk with Jane) it's likely he's done for.

(But we never find out what happened to old Bill. It could be that he did summon his courage and exercise leadership and brave enemy fire to claim an important objective or save a fallen comrade. We don't know, and the ambiguity is welcome.)

The melody for "I'll Be Home For Christmas" emerges, representing the hope that Jane feels, and the ironic truth that, as foretold by her isolation on the darkened platform, she'll never see Bill again. And the song, itself, is infused with irony because the last line of the lyrics is, "I'll be home for Christmas *if only in my dreams.*"

When Christmas does come at the film's heart-rending finish, Anne opens the present from her husband, whom she hopes against hope is still alive. She seems at wits' end. At long last, she gets the call that Tim is o.k. and is coming home. The film then concludes with Psalm 31:24—"Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord." The audience is thus extolled that love of family should motivate us to fight and faith in God provides courage sufficient to endure.

This exhortation was set up by the minister's recitation of "The Star-Spangled Banner" from the pulpit and Tim's confession that, while he entered the fight for adventure, he soon realized that what really mattered was 'Home Sweet Home.'

Is family more important than country? The film expects that its audience thinks so (probably each '44 theatergoer having *some* family to speak of). But by going to fight, and risking one's life, is not the country made top priority? After all, couldn't somebody else do the fighting? One less soldier probably won't make a difference, anyway.

Moreover, is the threat (Japan/Germany) really so great that the family will be threatened in an invasion or bombing raid? Perhaps they won't be bodily threatened, but, with defeat, the country's prospects will dim, and the opportunities of individual family members will be circumscribed as well.

But sometimes (look at Britain after WWI and WWII) winning the war makes things barely tolerable. The real decision is whether to fight or not. If a country can stay out of a war, and let other nations exhaust themselves, the treasury will not be depleted and the people may benefit by trade to the warring parties.

The rule seems to be, don't fight if you don't have to, but if you do fight, fight to win. Since almost all Americans were behind the decision to go to war, they were then eager to do their part to win it. That's the formula for American victory.

So the film is speaking to a people who were eager to fight, but whose spirits were flagging. Seeing this movie when it first came out would be like attending a group therapy session. Almost everybody could relate to the characters and take solace that, no, they weren't alone in their pain after all.

For a modern audience, what makes the film work is its representation of the family. The need for belonging is powerful, and in our day of fractured homes, *Since You Went Away* conveys an unintended but welcome message of hope well suited to aspiration or nostalgia.