

## **Praise for *Poker & Pop Culture* and Martin Harris**

“This book had to be written, and only one person could write it. Poker’s place in our culture has been Martin’s passion and expertise as long as I’ve known him. Poker is a story of a thousand stories, and they’re all here.”

Tommy Angelo, author of *Elements of Poker* and *Painless Poker*

“A thorough, well-informed and highly entertaining exploration of the cultural riches bred by poker, explaining why the game remains so quintessentially American while growing ever more universal.”

Anthony Holden, author of *Big Deal* and *Bigger Deal*

“Martin Harris’s *Poker & Pop Culture* is a lively, well researched, highly readable account of the game’s hold on the popular imagination, revealing its history – from Shakespeare to ESPN, Flash Kate to James Bond, Tony Soprano to Daniel Negreanu – with 1,001 telling details. A+ Americana, and then some.”

James McManus, author of *Positively Fifth Street* and *Cowboys Full*

“Heralded or condemned, in good times, bad times, dead or alive, poker has been through it all, and proven itself to be the ultimate survivor. Kudos to Martin Harris for his staggeringly in depth look at its intriguing history. *Poker & Pop Culture* holds all the cards and knows where the bodies are buried. So I highly suggest you pull up a comfy chair and deal yourself in for a terrific read!”

Joseph Walsh, actor, screenwriter and co-producer of *California Split*

“*Poker & Pop Culture* is more than the most detailed history of America’s favorite card game I’ve read yet. Martin Harris has written a monumentally readable, always engaging look at how poker has appeared in literature, television, movies, and other places. Filled with fascinating anecdotes about real-life and fictional poker games, this book is worth reading and re-reading. From John Wayne to William Shatner, Mississippi riverboats to online sites and countless places in between, Harris covers it all.”

David G. Schwartz, author of *Roll the Bones: The History of Gambling*

“Martin has always been one of my favorite poker writers – and I’m looking forward to seeing what he’s created in *Poker & Pop Culture*. It’s sure to be interesting and lively!”

Maria Konnikova, author of *Mastermind* and *The Confidence Game*

“Do not believe the absent-minded professor shtick. Martin Harris is the smartest person in poker. Like all great professors, he has the uncanny ability to boil down complex subjects and unravel tangled history to present a succinct timeline and understandable narrative of events.”

Paul “Dr. Pauly” McGuire, author of *Lost Vegas*

“I always wondered what ‘exhaustively researched’ really meant. Now I know. Harris has unearthed a staggering array of juicy poker facts and lore from literature, movies, television, music and history, but his accomplishment goes far beyond its remarkable thoroughness, giving context, stature and meaning to America’s game, conveying it all in a delightfully elegant prose that is as heady and surprising as hitting a one-outer on the river. *Poker & Pop Culture* is a fist-pumping winner of a book.”

Peter Alson, author of *Take Me to the River* and co-author of *One of a Kind*

“That the beautiful game of poker has spawned the tales of cheats and cardsharps and the most unsavory of muckrakers for me only adds to the allure. Poker is a game about character, after all, and what would character entail if not the basest things about us? Martin Harris swims in the details, glowingly, unflinchingly, and boldly peeling back the layers on the narrative of our game. I salute him for compiling these stories, for we who love the beautiful game of poker, we are the sons and daughters of riverboat gamblers, the descendants of presidents, and the sixth cousins of the baddest Stetson to ever pull a six-shooter from their waistband when laying down a paltry two pair. This tome is the definitive fabric of poker.”

Jesse May, author of *Shut Up and Deal*

“I’m insanely jealous of Martin Harris. At major poker events where we worked together side-by-side, Martin always seemed to arrive first, and leave last -- long after the workday was done. His tenacity usually paid off with outstanding content. Martin got the stories the rest of us missed. Now, Martin has penned a new book about poker and culture packed with brilliant insights. Damn you, Martin Harris!”

Nolan Dalla, poker writer and co-author of *One of a Kind*

MARTIN HARRIS



POKER  
& Pop  
Culture



TELLING THE STORY OF AMERICA'S FAVORITE CARD GAME



POKER



### **Martin Harris**

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# Introduction

It's a Saturday afternoon in 1944. You've wandered into the local theater for a few hours of entertainment, hoping perhaps to avoid the newsreels covering recent battles in Europe or attacks in the Pacific in favor of some lighter fare. Or say it's last week and after a spin through the dial you've paused on one of the classic film networks, again seeking something less dispiriting than what's streaming from the news channels.

You've happened upon the western *Tall in the Saddle* with John Wayne and Gabby Hayes. The Duke enters an older gentleman's office. "Mr. Rocklin," begins the older fellow, an actor named Donald Douglas who squints uncertainly through a pair of round bifocals. "What happened between you and my stepson last night?" It cuts to Wayne – that is, Mr. Rocklin – who hesitates just a moment as if considering the best way to answer. Then, with an earnest look, he says, "Poker."

"Oh," comes the nodding response, and the pair and plot move on.

Nothing more needs to be said. The audience nods as well, then and now. We all know poker, after all, whether we play America's favorite card game or not.

We know it as a game played by cowboys and card sharps, by soldiers and scouts, by presidents, peasants, and painted dogs. We know that unlike many other card games, poker requires players to match not only wits, but egos and nerve as well. It's a game in which the competition can be intellectual, emotional, mental, psychological, analytical, verbal, and – as might have been the case with Rocklin and the elderly gentleman's stepson – even physical. It's a game that suits the familiar image of Wayne's Old West cowboy, a figure of rugged independence who commands respect, who instinctively understands the relationship between risk and reward, and who

never shies from conflict. It's also a game befitting the image of America itself, the country in which poker was first introduced and for which the mythic cowboy – part real, part imagined – also stands as an emblem.

In other words, when Wayne says “poker,” you don't *have* to be a player yourself to have an idea what he means. You don't even need to know the rules in order to understand the game's logical place in a story such as this. A game of cards would provide a ready context for characters to clash, given how poker occupied such a prominent place in the culture during the time of the Old West. Or during the 1940s, for that matter. Or today.

In fact, the history of poker runs parallel with that of the United States, starting with its origins as a game whose features are largely borrowed from other cultures' card games before being assimilated into something distinctly “American.” Playing cards date from ninth century imperial China, evolving constantly over the next millennium as they were employed in a variety of games throughout Asia and Europe. By the late 18th century, most characteristics of the modern deck had been established, including the size and thickness of the cards, the rankings, and the four suits. Card games like *Poch* (from Germany), *primiera* (from Italy), *brag* (from Britain), and *mus* (from Spain) had all been carried to America by its early settlers and eventual founders, with another French game – *poque* – brought to the Louisiana Territory during the first decades of the 19th century. Poker emerged from all of those games, and as the new country's border marched westward over the coming decades, the game likewise swiftly spread via steamboats, wagon trains, stagecoaches, and locomotives.

From the beginning, three essential elements defined poker: cards, money, and bluffing. With the cards players build hands, not unlike the construction of a homestead with available materials. On such five-card combinations bets are placed, with the introduction of a draw adding an additional chance to set one's price. These financial commitments, like those routinely made on tracts of land or other futures, help make poker much more than an idle amusement, adding an urgent connection between the value of the cards and the lives of those holding them. Each hand becomes a complicated negotiation, with each player's personal idea of money's significance directly affecting the amounts set when selling, or costs agreed to when buying.

Of course such negotiations, like others that carried the country's inhabitants across the continent, don't *have* to be entered into in good faith. Perhaps more than any other element, the possibility of misrepresenting the value of one's hand with a bluff makes poker fundamentally different from other card games, and more readily representative of the nation of bold risk-takers playing it. The possibility of the bluff likewise adds layers of psychological complexity that help make poker – as the saying goes –



not just a game of cards played by people, but a game of people played with cards.

But connections between poker and America go much deeper than the coincidence of chronology or the way the game can be said to reflect the “pioneer spirit” of the nation’s early history. That’s because many values and ideals compiled and endorsed by the country’s founders and championed by generations thereafter find ready expression at the poker table.

Ideas of individual liberty start with the freedom to make those daring bluffs or to play one’s hand however one sees fit. They extend to the potential of actually earning a living from playing cards and chart a career path measured by pots won rather than hours clocked or goods sold. There are numerous examples from the game’s earliest days of individuals discovering that poker could provide for them more readily than other forms of employment – that what others viewed as “play” could for them count as “work.” Thus a well-timed raise while holding a winning hand might amount to a kind of personal declaration of independence. Similarly a correct fold could become a demonstration of self-reliance, smartly trusting one’s instinct regarding the strength an opponent’s hand as signaled by the bet amount or the faint but perceptible tremor in his voice when he announced it.

For a country shaped by capitalist ideology, there’s no more appropriate game to reflect both its individual-promoting benefits and antagonism-stirring drawbacks. A player’s chips become a kind of property, necessary to defend with every deal. The rules of the game are necessarily agreed upon like citizens assenting to laws governing their conduct. And by buying into the game each player assumes certain unalienable rights to continued life at the table, to the liberty to bet or fold or call or raise, and to the pursuit of happiness that comes from scooping a pot after winning a hand.

Some argue that poker uncannily exemplifies the “American dream” insofar as it provides all who wish to play an equal opportunity to succeed. Of course, those making the argument for the egalitarian nature of poker generally tend not to emphasize how much class distinctions matter. Players’ financial wherewithal not only affects their ability to take a seat, but also how they will play once they do. Bluffing is central, no doubt, but nothing can dissuade a player from boldly raising with inferior cards quite as much as the knowledge that he cannot afford to get called and lose.

Even so, it’s true to say that poker doesn’t “discriminate,” at least when the game is square and rules are respected. As in America, where laws dictate guidelines within which citizens can pursue their livelihood, poker suggests a similar ideal, even if that ideal is not always realized. Indeed, if you were to stick with *Tall in the Saddle* a little longer you’d find it was a dispute

over rules that caused the conflict between Rocklin and the stepson. You'd also discover that his need during the poker game to make a show of force in order to enforce those rules prefigures the rest of the plot when he is later called upon to restore order to a lawless Old West town.

There's one other factor poker's champions always need to acknowledge: the importance of luck. A sound grasp of odds and probabilities certainly provides a meaningful edge to some, as does being able to suss out the significance of opponents' actions, words, and other non-verbal "tells" while masking the meaning of one's own. Yet as anyone who has played poker knows only too well, a hand perfectly played does *not* guarantee a positive result. "Bad beats," "suckouts," and "coolers" happen all the time, the variety of terms players use to describe such misfortunes reflecting the frequency of their occurrence. Speaking of laws, the relative weight of luck and skill in poker has been the subject of many legal arguments in the U.S. dating almost from the time of the game's first introduction. Proponents wishing to distinguish poker from other gambling games have emphasized the significance of skill, while those wanting to prohibit the game have pointed to luck's undeniable role. Both are right, and it isn't that surprising to find judges over the years ruling in favor of either side many times over.

But that, too, is "American." Writing in the 1830s when both poker and the nation were amid early stages of growth and development, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked with astonishment on Americans' unwillingness to shy away from risk. "For them, the desire for well-being has become an anxious, burning passion that grows even as it is satisfied," wrote the Frenchman in *Democracy in America*, adding that while the need to emigrate began as matter of survival, "it has become a game of chance, which they love as much for the emotions it stirs as for the profit it brings."<sup>1</sup> To be sure, Americans particularly value honest work being duly compensated. Over the course of the nation's history, the idea of lifting oneself up by one's bootstraps has evolved into a persuasive ethic by which many swear. But Americans also love the adrenaline spike of a good gamble, with the promise of great rewards easily obtained providing equal encouragement to many.

Again, though, many of us know these things about poker – or a lot of them, anyway. When Tocqueville speaks of the nation's early entrepreneurs in terms that sound like he could be referring to poker players, there's something familiar about that to most of us as well. Whether we're playing or not we're "talking poker" to each other all the time, and there's no other game – not even baseball – that has established itself so prominently within the American vernacular. We know what it means when someone laments that "the chips are down." We watch out for the fellow

with “an ace up his sleeve,” knowing he could use such an advantage to “up the ante.” We’re always “passing the buck” when dodging an obligation (an archaic reference to the dealer’s button), or insisting “the buck stops here” when taking responsibility ourselves. We keep our “hand in the game” when wanting to stay involved, but try to remain mindful always to “have an out” when we do. When it’s time to make our meaning clear we’ll put our “cards on the table.” But when it becomes necessary to hide what we’re thinking from others, we’ll put on a “poker face.”

Mark Twain, himself a poker player, is said to have complained that not enough Americans were acquainted with the game. “There are few things that are so unpardonably neglected in our country as poker,” goes the quote. “The upper class knows very little about it. Now and then you find ambassadors who have sort of a general knowledge of the game, but the ignorance of the people is fearful. Why, I have known clergymen, good men, kind-hearted, liberal, sincere, and all that, who did not know the meaning of a ‘flush.’ It is enough to make one ashamed of one’s species.”<sup>2</sup>

It’s a favorite reference among poker players, although more often than not those who share it do not acknowledge that the writer of some of the greatest works of American satire was most assuredly bluffing. Usually the observation is repeated as a straightforward lament over poker’s lack of cultural standing. Yet poker was hardly neglected at the time, and Twain’s admonishment of the nation’s wealthy, the politically powerful, and its spiritual leaders was undoubtedly delivered with tongue firmly in cheek. In fact, evidence abounds from Twain’s era that poker was far from being neglected in America, with all three of the groups referenced by Twain well represented at the tables.

Stephen Crane’s short story “A Poker Game” presents a hotel-room game between a moneyed real estate maven and young heir to millions as entirely customary, with poker described as having by then become “one of the most exciting and absorbing occupations known to intelligent American manhood.”<sup>3</sup> Such a scene is reflected further by Cassius M. Coolidge’s contemporaneous “Dogs Playing Poker” series of paintings which likewise suggest in a less sober way that poker was a favorite pastime of the middle and upper classes. Ample evidence shows the nation’s elected officials were also avid players in Twain’s day. In *Jack Pots: Stories of the Great American Game*, Eugene Edwards declares that by the end of the 19th century “Washington is popularly regarded as the great poker center of the United States” in large part because “when Congress is in session, the whole town is in a fever of excitement, and the easiest way to work off the surplus steam is with a pack of cards.”<sup>4</sup> At the time Twain made his declaration, the president who had just left office, Ulysses S. Grant, was an especially dedicated poker player. In fact a former Congressman who

had been Grant's Minister to Great Britain, Robert C. Schenck, had earned widespread notoriety for compiling a book of rules for draw poker regarded as among the first of its kind. (In other words, Schenck was an ambassador with more than just a "general knowledge of the game.") The clergy, too, are sometimes described taking seats in poker tales of the period. There's Rev. Thankful Smith of the Thompson Street Poker Club stories written by Twain's contemporary Henry Guy Carleton. Smith is the poker-playing preacher who well knows what a flush is, and how sometimes a flush can be beaten because "Dat's de way wif cyards" since "Gamblin' 's onsartin."<sup>5</sup> In fact, a decade before, Twain himself had written a humorous short story, "Science vs. Luck," in which a group of clergymen play cards for money versus expert players as a test of card games' skill component. Such historical and literary evidence belies Twain's claim about poker's general lack of notice. But it also suggests there's more to poker's story – a *lot* more – than many of us might realize.

The game is so deeply embedded in American culture, its profound significance and even influence on the country's history has perhaps been taken for granted. For example, even the game's most ardent enthusiasts are likely unaware that Grant was a poker player. But he's part of a long, storied tradition of poker-playing presidents for whom acquaintance with the game was much more than incidental. Such a point can be argued with reference to domestic programs like the "Square Deal" and "New Deal" (both of which borrow from poker's egalitarian features), Cold War decisions influenced directly by game theory (a discipline borne from the study of "parlor games" including poker), and the game having provided at least one future president enough income to launch his first congressional campaign (the one nicknamed "Tricky Dick").

Stories like these often surprise students in the American Studies course I've taught for several years at UNC Charlotte, "Poker in American Film and Culture." So do others we cover that shed light on the many cultural contexts in which poker has appeared over the two centuries the game has been played. Each semester we travel through the game's colorful and varied history, often marveling at the sheer quantity of references to poker that appear initially in letters, memoirs, news accounts, and early strategy primers, then eventually extend into paintings, fiction, drama, music, film, and television.

We study poker's significance during the Civil War and reconstruction periods, then move into the 20th century to discover the game's popularity spreading to practically all social groups, traveling from steamboats and saloons to kitchen tables and living room parlors. We explore the game's significance to soldiers during both World Wars and other conflicts, the advent of casino culture and legalized poker, the birth of the World Series

of Poker and later boom in popularity of tournaments spurred in part by televised poker, as well as the comparatively recent growth of the online version of the game. While we move through poker's past, we're simultaneously reminded again and again of poker's prominence in the present when yet another politician accuses an opponent of "stacking the deck," another legal commentator describes a defendant's "ace in the hole," or another coach declares his team's readiness to go "all in" behind its star player. Often there will arise as well one more sitcom or drama using a poker game to further relationships between characters, not unlike *Tall in the Saddle* with its poker scene midway through the film.

Poker? Sure, we know poker. But how well do we know poker, really? After all, every hand of poker ever played has featured a combination of the known and unknown, with the distinction between the two deliberately complicated by the efforts of everyone involved. As historian John Lukacs once said of poker: "The important thing is not what happens but what people think happens."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, poker's portrayal in popular culture has always been rife with embellishments and intentional distortions that have collectively helped assign or reinforce certain ideas of what the game means. Thus the story of poker and its significance to American history and culture includes much that seems readily apparent, but also much that needs further explanation.

You really want to know "what happened"? Let's go back to the beginning and take a closer look at the story of America's favorite card game. Let's look as well at the many stories that have been told *about* poker – some true, some pure bluffs, and many somewhere in between – that have both increased the game's importance to American history and culture and shaped the way we think about poker and its significance.

Everyone seated? Good.

Here's the deal.



# 16 Poker in the Movies

The representation of poker in films has had more to do with forming opinions about the game than has any other variety of American popular culture. One could argue that when it comes to shaping ideas about poker, John Wayne, W.C. Fields, and Paul Newman have exerted more influence than anyone who has played the game.

It's a point worth making, because even though poker can sometimes be exciting and satisfying to watch in the movies, the game is rarely presented in a convincing way, at least to those who actually play poker. A *Washington Post* article from 2017 listing the 25 best "profession-based movies" as judged by experts in the selected fields leaves off poker altogether. Such an omission might connote doubts about whether or not being a poker player should be regarded as a profession, although the list

does include “chess player” and even “bank robber.”<sup>1</sup> However it also could stem from a relative paucity of realistic depictions of poker on the silver screen. “Poker in movies never quite comes off,” David Spanier once wrote, one reason being that in a poker hand “the drama is an interior one, consisting of what goes on in the players’ minds” and is thus difficult to capture and present to an audience.<sup>2</sup> But even when the primary focus isn’t on individual hands but on other contextual matters involving settings and players, those other elements are often also embellished, moving away from realism while reinforcing particular ideas about poker’s significance.

While some filmmakers do endeavor to portray poker realistically, it is often a secondary concern to using the game creatively to advance plots, build characters, and/or underscore themes. In other words, unless the film is specifically *about* poker, the game’s portrayal often serves other purposes than showing audiences how poker is *really* played. In westerns, such distortions frequently help support romantic visions of the Old West and its rough-and-tumble card-playing cowboys. In comedies, the rules, customs, and behavior-restricting etiquette of the game provide a ready context for the humorous upsetting of expectations. Meanwhile in dramas, poker has been used to color characters as reckless risk-takers, gifted polymaths, committed individualists, unprincipled degenerates, existential warriors, and a variety of other heroic (and anti-heroic) types.

## Westerns

### Poker and Violence in Early Westerns

The western holds a special place in the history of film criticism as it marks the start of “genre criticism” – that is, a variety of analysis that examines the movie principally in comparison with other, similar works. There were so many westerns made during the silent era and the first decades of sound film (up through the 1960s), that formal (or formulaic) similarities became readily apparent from film to film.

There are many reasons why westerns were so popular during these years. Most were set during the period following the Civil War, starting with the Reconstruction and lasting through the end of the 19th century, which was a period of continued westward expansion. Although individual westerns occasionally ignite debates about historical authenticity, most critics agree that the majority present a relatively idealized version of the Old West. They often highlight certain ideological values and ideas of national identity that helped make the films more commercially popular (as is often the case with mass market entertainment). In other words, these fictionalized accounts of the past were often presented with an eye toward satisfying contemporary audiences’ most favored ideas of themselves and

of America. To overgeneralize a bit, most westerns of the first half of the 20th century present an uncomplicated view of American progress and achievement, championing the advancement of the frontier – the “victory” of civilization over wilderness.

Poker appeared frequently. In some westerns, the use of the game is merely ornamental. Having characters play the signature card game of the Old West is akin to making sure they wear Stetson hats, ride horses, and carry guns. It’s also part of the requisite scenery, like the vast landscape shots typically serving to segue one scene to the next. However, there are many examples of westerns that thoughtfully incorporate poker not just as a casual reminder of the Old West setting, but as an important element of the storytelling. Frequently the game is associated with violence, another way of highlighting hazards on the frontier. Poker also serves as a shorthand method of sorting heroes from villains in the fictional worlds these westerns create, often marked by a kind of “black and white” morality, a distinction sometimes even indicated by the color of Stetsons the characters wear. Poker games in westerns also become linked to efforts to restore order to among outlaws, or even provide the cause of more chaotic disruptions.

A film from 1899 called *Poker at Dawson City*, one of 1,200 or so films emanating from studios owned by Thomas Edison’s companies from the 1890s through 1910s, is sometimes called the first ever “western.” It might also earn the distinction as the very first “poker movie,” even if its running time is less than it takes to play a single hand.

The title sets the game along the Yukon River in northwest Canada during the Klondike Gold Rush of the late 1890s,<sup>3</sup> although the film was shot in Edison’s Black Maria studio in West Orange, New Jersey. The 20-second, single-shot silent film ostensibly shows the aftermath of a hand gone wrong, with gun-waving players brawling with each other around a card table while a bartender tries to cool tempers by spraying them with water. It’s a suitable introduction to the topic of poker in the movies, where card playing and conflict are often two of a kind.

The association of poker with violence continued in other early silent westerns such as *Hell Bent* (1918) directed by John Ford. The film stars Harry Carey as Cheyenne Harry, a “saddle tramp” traveling from place to place as a kind of Old West nomad whom Carey portrayed in numerous Ford-directed films. Cheyenne Harry has many vices, including stealing, drinking, and cheating at poker, and often the stories feature him overcoming his wayward ways in order to serve as the story’s hero.

*Hell Bent* introduces the character in a unique way, with the film opening on a novelist reading a letter from his publisher asking him to write a story about “a more ordinary man” than is typically found in novels featuring





A novelist draws inspiration from Frederic Remington's 1897 painting "A Misdeal" in *Hell Bent* (1918)

too-good-to-be-true heroes. The writer then gazes on Frederic Remington's painting *A Misdeal* showing the aftermath of a deadly game of cards in which a player scoops up the pot after apparently having killed several opponents (discussed in Chapter 5). The painting then comes to life (in the novelist's imagination), with the men not dead but recovering slowly from having been beaten. We soon see Harry fleeing the scene and getting rid of cards from his pockets – multiple handfuls, all of them aces. As in other Carey-Ford films, Cheyenne Harry ultimately becomes reformed into someone who can serve as the story's hero. In this case, his poker cheating is just one of the vices he must leave behind in order to do so. While Ford's film and the flawed character of Harry are designed to be more realistic than the typically romanticized version of the Old West, it still perpetuates ideas about poker's negative influence.

*Hell Bent* also heralds what will be a long cinematic tradition of Western heroes based on other fictional representations rather than on actual historical figures. Early examples of such adaptations include several of Owen Wister's influential 1902 western novel *The Virginian* (discussed next chapter). Both Cecil B. DeMille's 1914 version and Tom Forman's from 1923 highlight an early scene from the book between the story's unnamed hero and his antagonist Trampas revealing how the pair's years-long animosity begins with an argument at the poker table. After being called a "son of a ---" by Trampas, the Virginian coolly responds "When you call me

that, smile.”<sup>4</sup> The line survived into later popular culture, including being repurposed in many westerns. The better known 1929 adaptation, directed by Victor Fleming and with Gary Cooper in the title role, also retains a version of the verbal exchange while omitting the poker game. The link between poker and violence is reinforced later in the film, however, when Trampas finally challenges the Virginian to a duel. “I got you corralled now and I’m calling your hand,” Trampas says, to which the Virginian testily responds, “All right, what do ya got?” – an angry prelude to a different kind of showdown.<sup>5</sup>

A poker game similarly brings about the story’s central clash in the pre-Civil War silent western *White Oak* (1921) written by and starring William S. Hart. Introduced as “king of the River Dealers,” Hart’s character Oak Miller is a gambler entangled in a complicated plot involving his sweetheart, his sister, and a villainous character named Granger who poses a threat to both. Set in the early 1850s, hero and villain first meet while playing “the ancient and deadly game of stud poker” (as a title card describes it), a game that ends with Oak winning a big pot off Granger. After losing the hand Granger makes an offending comment about Oak’s beloved. The third player in the game takes offense and throws the cards at Granger, who draws his pistol. Oak then fires a shot to quell the dispute. The game and situation prefigure the final scene of the film in which Oak tries to strangle Granger, but a third person – a Native American whose daughter Granger had treated badly – throws a knife into Granger’s back to kill him.



William S. Hart (left) as Oak Miller in *White Oak* (1921)

## Card-Playing Cowboys in Classical Westerns

Moving into the sound era and the period of the “classical western,” we’ve already mentioned Ford’s landmark 1939 film *Stagecoach* and its unobvious allusion to the “dead man’s hand.” For much of that film John Wayne’s character, the Ringo Kid, is shown seeking vengeance upon the murderer of his father. When the murderer wins a pot with aces and eights near the film’s conclusion, there’s little doubt what will happen next. That same year came *Destry Rides Again* starring Marlene Dietrich and James Stewart in which the corruption at the heart of the Old West town of Bottleneck is revealed immediately by a crooked poker game at the Last Chance Saloon. A player bets his ranch on a hand of five-card stud only to have his ace in the hole swapped out for a deuce. When the sheriff comes to investigate he is promptly shot dead, setting in motion a plot that requires Destry (Stewart) to set things right. *The Bronze Buckaroo* also appeared in 1939 – one of several films by pioneering African American director Richard C. Kahn, with Herb Jeffries leading an all-black cast. The film is mostly a light-hearted affair with hijinks involving a ranch hand using ventriloquism to fool someone into buying a talking mule and the cast breaking out into song at regular intervals. However the merriment is suddenly interrupted by the sight of a player dealing himself seconds in a saloon poker game, upon which his opponent instantly shoots him dead.

In a similar vein came *Sunset Trail* (1939), one of more than 60 films featuring the character Hopalong Cassidy. Starring William Boyd in the title role, the film changes Cassidy from the rough-hewn wrangler of Clarence E. Mulford’s original stories into a comically-chaste iconoclast who doesn’t smoke, avoids hard language, and only drinks sarsaparilla. The character pokes fun at “masculine” traits associated with cowboys, but ultimately reinforces those traits by showing it’s mostly an act and Cassidy is as tough as they come. The villain is a casino owner named Monte Keller (Robert Fiske) who begins the picture buying a ranch and 2,000 head of cattle from a local farmer, then shooting the farmer dead and keeping the cash. Cassidy arrives in Silver City to save the day, though comes disguised as a dandy with seemingly little experience riding horses and other ways of the Old West. He even responds with mock disgust at the sight of the casino, though nonetheless sits down for a high-stakes game with Keller. Continuing to act the part of a greenhorn, in one big hand of five-card stud, Cassidy pretends not to know hand rankings, asking if a full house beats a flush before raising on the last round. That’s enough for Keller who folds his five spades, then Cassidy shows him he only had two pair. As viewers soon see, the poker game neatly functions as a kind of miniature set piece mimicking the larger plot in which Cassidy also successfully bluffs Keller.



John Wayne as Rocklin confronts Judge Garvey (Ward Bond) with a suspicious deck of cards in *Tall in the Saddle*

The more serious *Tall in the Saddle* (1944) finds John Wayne as the independent Rocklin who like Cassidy plays an outsider coming to a lawless Old West town to restore order. On his way to Santa Inez, Rocklin has a conversation with the stagecoach driver Dave (played by frequent sidekick George “Gabby” Hayes) who makes an offhand reference to his boss being “too darn sane, believing in law and order.” “What’s wrong with law and order?” asks Rocklin in response. “Well, it depends on who’s dishing it out,” Dave answers. “I never was much on taking orders myself, and as for the law... heh... you’ll find out what that means around these parts.”

After arriving in Santa Inez, Rocklin joins a saloon poker game that includes several players, including Clint Harolday (Russell Wade), the stepson of Dave’s boss, who has been the big winner. Soon Rocklin and Clint tangle in a contentious hand of five-card draw that ends with a dispute over the rules and Clint drawing his weapon before claiming the pot. Rocklin quietly leaves, walking up the stairs to his room above the saloon. As Clint gathers the money, it is reiterated to him by others how he should not have won the hand. “When anybody plays poker with me they play my game or not at all,” Clint says. They warn Clint that Rocklin is coming back, but he doesn’t believe it. But of course, Rocklin returns, now sporting a full holster, and when Clint immediately relents Rocklin gathers the bills and bids all a good night. The scene confirms Dave’s earlier observation about “law and order.”

There are rules, sure, but not everyone cares to follow them, and ultimately what really matters is whether or not someone is willing and powerful enough to enforce order. The scene also importantly positions Rocklin as willing to take on that responsibility, which becomes needful once he gets more deeply involved in the ranch wars happening in Santa Inez. In other words, the hand precisely foreshadows the larger story, with Rocklin the one having to bring order to the anarchic Old West town.

The 1950 film *Winchester '73* is in some ways an unusual western, although it still features easy-to-identify heroes and villains with good winning out in the end. The title refers to the Winchester Rifle Model 1873, which is the most coveted firearm among good and bad alike. The story opens on a shooting competition held in Dodge City where Marshal Wyatt Earp (Will Geer) presides. Two shooters emerge as the finalists, Lin McAdam (James Stewart) and Dutch Henry Brown (Stephen McNally), and after Lin wins Dutch Henry and his gang beat him up and make off with the prized Winchester. As it turns out the two men have a long history of bad blood and it is later revealed Dutch Henry killed McAdam's father. However we eventually learn that they are actually brothers, and Dutch Henry realizes that he killed his own father. On the way to that finale Dutch Henry plays a poker game with a cheater in which he gets swindled out of his money and the Winchester. He later manages to get the gun back, but it doesn't help him during the final shootout with Lin, especially after Dutch Henry impulsively uses up all his ammunition. Much as he showed a lack of perception and foresight when getting hustled in the poker game, a similar recklessness dooms Dutch Henry in his last heads-up confrontation.

Other westerns show poker upsetting the tenuous balance of frontier life, more often than not bringing harm to those who play and thus implicitly advancing criticism of the game as a source of trouble. *The Lawless Breed* (1953) provides a patent example of such commentary in its adaptation of real-life Old West figure John Wesley Hardin's self-aggrandizing autobiography. While Hardin mentions playing faro, euchre, seven-up, and poker in his memoir, the film makes poker-playing a central part of his character, positioning it as the first step down a dangerous path. Early in the movie, Hardin (Rock Hudson) earns his preacher father's wrath by his card-playing and leaves home. He had been studying law, but sells his textbooks for cash with which to gamble in a bit of heavy-handed symbolism. Soon Hardin manages to win a hand of five-card draw by outcheating an opponent trying to cheat him, afterwards drawing his gun faster and killing the man. A later game involves Hardin winning by cheating as well, furthering the impression of poker being a corrupt, morally-bankrupt game. The film goes on to superimpose a happy ending on Hardin's tragic real life, ultimately making him out to be the unjustly accused victim of circumstance with remorse over the gambler's life he's led.

"I got a different idea about gambling... I'm going to deal honest cards," insists Mark Fallon (Tyrone Power) as the title character of *The Mississippi Gambler* (1953). Fallon thrives at the steamboat poker tables, and even opens his own casino in New Orleans. But he endures hardship in battles with the less scrupulous, and even his triumphs at poker turn sour when a man he defeats for all of his money kills himself. Poker is more incidental in Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo* (1959) starring John Wayne as the excellently-named Sheriff John T. Chance struggling to maintain order in the Texas town of the film's title. There is a subplot, however, involving a woman player named Feathers (Angie Dickinson) being unjustly accused of cheating before being exonerated. "You could quit playing cards," advises Chance afterwards, suggesting avoiding poker altogether is a way to better one's chances of staying out of trouble. Poker comes up as well in the sprawling multi-part 1962 epic *How the West Was Won* in the character of a gambler named Cleve Van Valen (Gregory Peck). He gets a bumpy game going while riding a wagon train to California, but gets yanked out of the back of the wagon mid-hand by an angry wagonmaster unhappy about traveling with gamblers. Much later in the film, after Van Valen's death, his widow (Debbie Reynolds) continues to lament his predilection for poker and the strange "sense of honor" that compelled him to feel "duty-bound" to join a game.

### **Poker in Later Westerns**

As the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema came to a close, westerns began to appear that not only upset genre expectations but also openly questioned the romanticized, conservative view of the Old West.

Fielder Cook's 1966 western-comedy *A Big Hand for the Little Lady* uses a single, inordinately lengthy hand of five-card draw to overturn conventional ideas about gender roles and poker being exclusively a man's game. The film is set in the late 19th century in Laredo, Texas, where a group of five wealthy businessmen meet each year in a hotel saloon to play a private high-stakes poker game. A family passing through on their way to a newly purchased farm in San Antonio has to stop to repair their wagon. As it happens, the husband Meredith (Henry Fonda) has a gambling problem, and while his wife Mary (Joanne Woodward) is at the blacksmith's with the wagon, Meredith can't avoid joining the game. When the men learn about Mary having made Meredith quit gambling (the "little woman make you give it up?"), they have a big laugh over the idea of *their* wives asking them to quit poker, such a challenge to their authority seeming unthinkable. The digs continue, such as later when Meredith shuffles and a player says he handles the cards "just like my old grandma used to." Even Meredith's name (also a woman's name), seems to underline his apparent lack of manliness.

The game is played using table stakes, although it becomes clear that rule isn't being strictly enforced. However the players are adamant about following "western rules," meaning a player is not allowed to "tap out" if he hasn't got enough to bet. In other words, if the betting gets too high and a player hasn't enough to call, that player must "bow out" of the hand and lose whatever he's put into the pot. Soon it becomes clear that Meredith is in over his head. He's sweating, growing increasingly edgy, and after losing yet another pot is talking out loud about his bad luck. Then comes a most curious hand in which, incredibly, all six of the players apparently have been dealt strong hands. Meredith, down to his last few hundred when the hand begins, finds himself bet out of the hand. Desperate, he gives his cards to his young son, then rushes up to their room to collect \$3,000 more – the family's entire savings – with which he's allowed to buy more chips. (As noted, they seem to ignore the table stakes rule.) The betting resumes, but with all of the reraising Meredith again finds himself out of money and needing \$500 more to call. And even if he does call, he can't close the betting. It is at this moment Mary returns, horrified to find Meredith in the game risking their nest egg. Overcome by the stress of the situation, Meredith falls to the floor, the victim of an apparent heart attack. While being attended to by a doctor, Meredith gives his cards to Mary, insisting that *she* play out the hand for him. She agrees to do so, and takes a seat at the table. First, though, she has a question.

"How do you play this game?" she asks.

From there the comically complicated story shows Mary receiving a quick poker primer, then having the idea to go across the street to the Cattle and Merchants Bank to attempt to secure a loan with the other players accompanying her. When asked what collateral she has by the bank's owner, she shows him her "big hand" – a situation resembling a famous story from poker folklore (discussed in Chapter 13). The bank owner is convinced and supplies her the needed funds, and after she puts in a big raise all five opponents fold their hands.

The behavior of the men afterwards shows them each expressing reformed views regarding women's inferiority, their former chauvinistic boorishness suddenly dissolving. As if everything weren't convoluted enough, a final twist reveals the entire plot has been a scam perpetrated by the family, the doctor, and the banker. Mary is not married to Meredith at all, but is instead Ruby, the banker's girlfriend and leader of the group of con artists. The film's final shot shows her dealing a hand of poker to a table full of men, hardly a typical western scene. The film upends traditional gender roles and ideas of women being inferior – whether in the Old West, at a poker table, or in modern America – showing that Mary (or Ruby) is no "little lady."

Henry Hathaway's *5 Card Stud* (1968) adapts elements of the traditional western into a kind of hard-boiled murder mystery, with poker the cause of trouble once again. A cheater in a card game is lynched as punishment, with only professional card player Van Morgan (Dean Martin) raising objections. Morgan leaves town in search of other games, and soon after the players from the lynch mob start to be murdered one by one. The mystery isn't terribly well hidden, however, as the killings begin soon after a new pistol-packing preacher named Rev. Jonathan Rudd (Robert Mitchum) arrives to town. The similarly violent *A Man Called Sledge* (1970), co-written and directed by Vic Morrow and starring James Garner going against type in the villainous title role, has higher ambitions artistically but fails to match the better Italian-made "spaghetti westerns" it tries to emulate. Heavy on atmosphere and even heavier-handed with its morality, multiple montages of poker games merely serve as a mechanism to deliver clumsy judgment against the destructive effects of greed.

Other revisionist westerns bring poker to the foreground more effectively when constructing their protagonists, even when those characters fail to meet the unrealistic ideals set by their fictional forbears. For example, Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) begins like many westerns with the arrival of a mysterious figure to an Old West settlement, in this case "Pudgy" McCabe (Warren Beatty) to the oddly-named town of Presbyterian Church in Washington state. With Leonard Cohen's poker-themed "The Stranger Song" as the soundtrack, McCabe enters a tavern and immediately establishes himself by locating a blanket, fashioning a makeshift poker table, and dealing others into a game of five-card stud. McCabe's spell of community-building prefigures his taking over and running the town's brothel from which he similarly functions as a kind of "dealer" in charge of managing the town's inhabitants. His authority is only diminished by the arrival of an equally enigmatic Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie) who becomes his business partner.

It's clear from the start that McCabe's status as an Old West hero is partly built on a bluff, namely a rumor of dubious origin of his having once killed a man for marking cards in a poker game. Eventually he and Mrs. Miller's modest empire consisting of the brothel, an adjacent bath house, and "McCabe's House of Fortune" is threatened by a mining company desirous to buy them out, and after McCabe's mishandled attempt at negotiation falls through, hired killers are assigned to eliminate him. Prior to the shootout that ends the film, McCabe plays against type by revealing both emotion and vulnerability. He even cries. Then during the showdown, combatants display a further lack of heroism through their willingness to shoot each other in the back. By the end, McCabe's poker playing may well be the *only* trait he shares with traditional western heroes.



*The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972) provides a similarly twisted take on the genre, featuring Paul Newman as the title character. It is a strange, uneven film that plays out like a fantasy, even though it is based on a true story. Like McCabe, Bean uses the force of his personality to ensconce himself in a leadership role in a frontier town, declaring himself a “judge” and frequently holding court over poker games. As the narrator explains, “I reckon poker had as much to do with winning the West as Colts .45 or the Prairie schooner.” Indeed, poker is described as “more a religion, than a game,” with Bean believing himself “a past master.”

That said, the games in the film mainly show Bean to be a losing player, though nonetheless confirm his authority over his dusty kingdom. For example, after losing a hand to one of his marshals, Whorehouse Lucky Jim (Steve Kanaly), the Judge immediately charges Jim \$25 for the next beer he orders. “That ain’t sportin’,” Jim complains. “What is a man supposed to do?” “Start losing or quit drinking,” Bean declares. One last poker game precedes a final battle between Bean and a rival to his authority. As if to foreshadow the gunplay to come, the players use bullets for chips. “I open for a .38,” says one. “I’ll call the .38 and raise you two .45s.” When the end finally comes for Bean, his demise is reported in fitting language: “The judge cashed in his chips.”

Other latter-day westerns have also made certain to incorporate poker. In *Silverado* (1985), an homage of sorts to the classical western, a gambler named Slick (Jeff Goldblum) shows up midway through the story cheekily looking for an “honest game” of poker. Unsurprisingly, he turns out to be less than honest as the stock figure of a rambling, gambling man. *Maverick* (1994), an adaptation of the earlier television show (see Chapter 20) with Mel Gibson as the comic cowboy, fashions its plot around an anachronism – a poker tournament played aboard a steamboat. *Open Range* (2003), another throwback western directed by and starring Kevin Costner, begins with a slow-paced poker game among cowboys waiting out a rainstorm, one of many nods to generic conventions also serving as a light-hearted prelude to more serious conflicts to come. “A man’s trust is a valuable thing,” says the oldest of the group to the youngest. “You don’t want to lose it for a handful of cards.” Coming at the start of the film, the only meaningful context for the maxim are the century’s worth of westerns that precede it.

Saloon poker becomes a requisite element in science fiction films re-imagining the Old West, such as the futuristic sci-fi thriller *Westworld* (1973), written and directed by Michael Crichton. The film imagines an adult-themed amusement park populated by robots enacting various historical periods and settings. In the Old West area of the park, the main characters sit in a saloon playing poker. Technicians overseeing the action on closed-circuit monitors call out “all right, let’s start that bar fight,” at

which point one of the poker-playing robots yells “Cheat!” and a brawl ensues. The time-travel comedies *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (1989) and *Back to the Future Part III* (1990) are also both careful to incorporate poker (and bar fights) when reimagining the Old West. In the former, the dim-witted duo travel through time seeking help with a high school history project and visit a New Mexico saloon in 1879 where they play poker with the notorious outlaw Billy the Kid. The third *Back to the Future* installment similarly travels to a fictional California town in 1885, where among those sitting at the tables playing poker in the Palace Saloon are three veterans of western films: Dub Taylor, Pat Buttram, and Harry Carey Jr. (son of the silent film star). The bartender is likewise played by another frequent western actor, Matt Clark.

More recently, the neo-western *Hell or High Water* (2016) has fun with the genre’s formula in several ways, including moving the action out of the Old West and into a contemporary setting. The film smoothly introduces a situation in which a pair of bank robbers choose to launder their ill-gotten gains at an Oklahoma casino located on a Native American reservation. One of the outlaws sits down at a poker table and battles with a Comanche over a hand of hold’em, and their tough talk parallels the light-hearted banter between the Texas Ranger and his half-Indian partner who are chasing the criminals. It also recalls the western’s long tradition of using clashes over cards to complement broader battles for higher stakes.

## Comedies

### Poker in Silent Comedies

Poker serves a variety of purposes in film comedies, including as a tried and tested means by which to introduce a plot-driving complication into characters’ lives. The trouble tends not to be as threatening as occurs in non-comedies, however, and generally does not interfere with the films’ requisite happy endings. Often the humor generated from poker is derived from upsetting expectations, sometimes by disturbing the rules and etiquette of the game. Many examples of cheating at poker are often comically exaggerated in such films, while strip poker also frequently appears to add a risqué element and generate laughs.

We’ve already talked about the 1912 short *A Cure for Pokeritis* (discussed Chapter 7), which implies poker is a kind of sickness in need of remedying, and other silent comedies treat poker similarly. In *The Thousand-Dollar Husband* (1916), a romantic comedy starring Blanche Sweet as a Swedish maid named Olga, poker is a source of trouble early on when Olga’s love interest discovers his father has lost his fortune then promptly loses everything he has in a poker game. *When Do We Eat?* (1918) is another five-reel-

er directed by Fred Niblo starring Enid Bennett as Nora, an actress who ultimately is able to use her dramatic chops to thwart a bank robbery. Along the way the crooks reveal their villainy by cheating a young man out of \$300 in a card game, with poker used to liken one form of robbery with another.

Poker similarly creates trouble in *Dr. Jack* (1922) starring one of silent film's great comedians, Harold Lloyd, as the mild-mannered physician, Dr. Jackson (or "Jack" for short). Like other Lloyd films, *Dr. Jack* is full of great gags highlighting Lloyd's special brand of physical comedy. Halfway through the film comes a relatively lengthy poker scene, in which Lloyd is



Harold Lloyd as *Dr. Jack* (1922)

given another chance to engage in his typical antics. It also helps further establish his character as a doctor who is always quick to come up with unorthodox, creative "remedies" to those in need.

In a hotel lobby, Dr. Jack encounters a young woman asking for his assistance. Her father is upstairs playing in an illegal poker game, and she asks him to "get my daddy away" from the game since "he'll lose his paycheck... he always does." Dr. Jack goes upstairs to find four men playing five-card draw. Soon he notices a box containing several decks of cards, and quickly comes up with a way to break up the game. Procuring aces from a number of the decks, Dr. Jack surreptitiously supplies each of the players with cards needed for *all* of them to make four aces. All four put everything they have in the middle, including the young woman's father betting his paycheck. The showdown leads to pandemonium – and a nifty ride down the banister to safety by Dr. Jack – though the ruse nonetheless works to save the father from ruin. As in *A Cure for Pokeritis*, poker is presented as a kind of "illness" that Dr. Jack finds a way to treat.

### **W.C. Fields, the Comedic Card Cheat**

One of the most iconic images of poker in mainstream entertainment is of W.C. Fields stealthily peering out from under a stovepipe hat over a carefully protected poker hand. There's a certain irony in the image, however. While Fields is the one looking wary, his opponents are really the ones

who ought to be suspicious. After all, whenever *any* of Fields' characters played poker, it was pretty much a given the game would be crooked. As biographer Robert Lewis Taylor once noted, there is "something so blatantly felonious about the sight of Fields in a poker game that its humor was assured from the start."<sup>6</sup>

Fields had already made a mark in vaudeville and on the Broadway stage when he began his film career during the early silent era. By the 1930s he had become one of cinema's biggest stars, easily transitioning to sound in dozens of films until his death in 1946. Often Fields portrayed variations of a similar character, a hustling con man constantly putting one over witless others as the audience knowingly laughed along. In the 1923 musical comedy *Poppy*, Fields played a fraudster named Prof. Eustace McGargle, and one scene in particular, singled out by critic Alexander Woollcott, helped catapult Fields to greater fame. Woollcott wrote: "The stud game in which he manages to deal himself four fours and to win a thousand-dollar pot without having undergone the burdensome necessity of putting up any money himself is the most hilarious minor episode of the new season."<sup>7</sup>

According to Taylor, Fields claimed during rehearsals that he had put the scene together "from experience" fleecing skilled sharps. However when pressed for details about where he had gathered such experience, Fields cheekily avoided specifics. "Hither and yon," he said. Taylor notes that Fields shunned gambling for significant stakes, and in fact was highly averse to all forms of risk, avoiding investing in stocks and bonds (and thereby surviving the 1929 crash unscathed).<sup>8</sup> Fields portrayed a man losing money by investing in an oil stock in *The Potters* (1927), a now-lost silent film that also includes his first turn in film playing poker. Later in *Tillie and Gus* (1933), the first full-length talkie in which he had a starring role, Fields plays Augustus Q. Winterbottom whom we first meet in the film on trial for having shot a man during a game of draw poker. He defends his actions by explaining how during the game he had dealt himself four aces, only to find his opponent (and soon-to-be shooting victim) had drawn *five* aces. "I'm a broad-minded man, gents," he says. "I don't object to nine aces in one deck. But when a man lays down five aces in one hand... and besides, I know what I dealt him!"

Rather than toss him into jail as he deserves, the judge absurdly rules Gus must leave town, something he is more than glad to do once he receives a letter that his ex-wife's brother has recently died, leaving him part of his estate. As it happens, Gus finds himself reunited on the train with his estranged wife, Tillie, played by Alison Skipworth, who has received a similar letter. They further reveal themselves as con artists when Gus swindles a group of players in a humorous hand of poker in which his corrupt deal allows his four aces to beat his opponents' four kings, four queens, and four jacks.

Fields appeared in a film called *Six of a Kind* (1934) soon after, the title of which sounds like a poker reference. (It was called *Poker Party* when it was released in France.) However the film is more of a road movie featuring an ensemble cast including Skipworth again as well as George Burns and Gracie Allen.<sup>9</sup> The next year came *Mississippi* (1935), a musical comedy set on a steamboat starring Bing Crosby in which Fields plays a supporting role as the ship's pilot, Commodore Orlando Jackson. In another poker scene, Jackson deals himself five aces, and after discarding one reacts with frustration when he sees he's given himself another ace. He surreptitiously manages to discard and draw two more times, yet keeps picking up a fifth ace. Others are cheating, too, with multiple players also holding four aces. The showdown produces some comic violence, with Commodore Jackson bluffing once more by blowing cigar smoke into his pistols to suggest he had fired them when he had not.

Later Fields was paired with Mae West in the western spoof *My Little Chickadee* (1940), yet another film featuring a nonsensical plot mostly existing to provide opportunities for comedic ad-libbing. As Cuthbert J. Twillie, Fields again hustles a group of dupes in a saloon game in the scene from which comes the famous image of Fields peering over his cards. A little later in the movie Fields delivers one of the more memorable movie lines about poker when inviting a country bumpkin to play a game. "Is this a game of chance?" asks the victim. "Not the way I play it, no," comes the reply.

### **Poker Neither Good Nor Evil**

Just as *My Little Chickadee's* exaggeration of various western tropes pokes fun at the genre and at idealized versions of the Old West, Fields' many farcical scenes of cheating at poker similarly serve to diminish unreasonable fears about the game. Such scenes make poker appear more a context for harmless laughs than for real danger. There are many other examples of film comedies treating poker in a similarly playful way, not necessarily casting moral judgment one way or another.

*The Lady Eve* (1941) mixes romance and slapstick while telling the story of a father-daughter con artist team, "Colonel" Harrington (Charles Coburn) and Jean (Barbara Stanwyck), who on a transatlantic ocean liner target the naïve wealthy son of a brewery magnate, Charles Pike (Henry Fonda). After setting up their mark with an evening of bridge, they play poker the next night where the father uses his ability to "deal fifths" (saving the top four cards) and multiple extra decks hidden on his person to help win thousands from Charles. But Barbara falls in love with their victim, and she starts cheating for *him* by replacing her father's four-of-a-kind hands with poor ones. The fact is, Charles, himself an avid poker player (he calls himself an "expert") with seemingly unlimited means, cannot be hurt



Charles Coburn, Barbara Stanwyck, and Henry Fonda in *The Lady Eve* (1941)

that greatly by the game, nor can the film's many twists and turns avoid ending with Jean and Charles happily together.

Charles Coburn also stars in the comedy *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* (1952), this time as a character who actually uses poker for "good" (so to speak). Coburn plays an elderly millionaire bachelor wishing to leave his estate to the descendants of a woman he had loved when younger, but who married someone else. He visits the family under a different name in order to get to know them before making them his beneficiaries, and one of the good deeds he performs on their behalf is to win money in a poker game to help one of the sons pay off a gambling debt. In *Roman Holiday* (1953), Gregory Peck's character Joe Bradley, an American reporter working in Italy, is introduced sitting at a poker table. At first it seems he's playing for significant sums, with bets of "500" and "1,000," but when the winner rakes in the pot he mentions it adds up to ten bucks – they're playing with Italian lira, not U.S. dollars. Joe's poker playing hardly reflects badly on him, other than to signify a kind of mundane existence preceding the higher "stakes" of the romantic adventure he soon falls into with Audrey Hepburn's wayward princess. Peck also stars in the romantic comedy *Designing Woman* (1957) as a sportswriter named Mike somewhat mismatched with a clothes designer named Marilla played by Lauren Bacall. The pair's differences are highlighted when Mike hosts his regular poker game on the same night Marilla has invited a group of theater friends to perform a play in the

neighboring room. While a contrast is vaguely drawn suggesting poker to be a less refined recreation than the dramatic arts, there's no special judgment made against the game.

Other comedies continue this theme of avoiding judging poker too harshly, even when characters are cheating. *Kaleidoscope* (1966) is a flashy yet thin caper about an American criminal in Europe that features a novel method of cheating at cards. Barney Lincoln (Warren Beatty) manages to doctor the plates from which the Kaleidoscope brand playing cards are printed. Then using special (and amusingly conspicuous) thick-framed eyeglasses, Lincoln cleans up in several high-stakes Chemin de Fer games at a casino. He is eventually caught and subsequently agrees to help the authorities nab a crime lord in another big game of five-card stud. Only when the Kaleidoscope cards get replaced and Lincoln has to play without cheating does any minor tension arise. A short, inspired scene in the Bill Murray vehicle *Stripes* (1981) finds soldiers in basic training playing poker in the barracks, with the experienced player Ox (John Candy) taking advantage of the slow-witted novice Cruiser (John Diehl). Cruiser asks his opponent how to play his hand, and Ox convinces him to bet all he has with just a pair of fours. "Go on, bluff me!" says Ox, and when Cruiser does Ox promptly calls and shows a full house to scoop the pot. The comedy *Honeymoon in Vegas* (1992) similarly matches a far-fetched card game with a far-fetched plot. Jack (Nicolas Cage) and Betsy (Sarah Jessica Parker) travel to Las Vegas for a spur-of-the-moment marriage, though before the couple can get to the altar Jack loses \$65,000 in a game of five-card draw to hustler Tommy Korman (James Caan). The big hand that sinks Jack – a jack-high straight flush losing to a queen-high straight flush – is improbable (and most certainly crooked). So, too, is it hard to believe the couple agrees to let Betsy spend a weekend with Tommy in lieu of paying the debt.

Such moral neutrality about poker in film comedies probably reaches a kind of apotheosis in *Oh God! You Devil* (1984) in which George Burns, starring as God in the third installment of the series, plays a hand of five-card draw for a person's soul against the devil, also played by Burns. The devil is dealt two pair, then improves to a full house on the draw while God draws two cards to his three to a straight flush. Then God puts in a big raise involving all the souls of those on his "list" (i.e., who have chosen him, not the devil). "If I lose, they're all fair game for you," God explains. "If I win, you can't touch them, ever, even if they ask for you." "Too rich for me," the devil says as gives up his hand, then cringes when God shows he's bluffed with ten-high. "Why did I fold?!" cries the devil. "I put the fear of me in you," God cracks.

It's clear enough that while individuals may choose good or evil, poker in and of itself is neither.