

How does the film witness show the clash between amish culture and modern america...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

"Witness" is a modern thriller that tells the story of John Book, a Philadelphia cop whose life is altered while trying to help Rachel, an Amish woman, and her son Samuel, who witnesses a murder in a Philadelphia train station bathroom. After discovering that a member of his force committed the murder, Book travels to Lancaster County with Rachel and Samuel and poses as a member of the Amish community to hide from his murderous police peers. While there, love blooms between Rachel and Book, and he finds himself drawn in by the honesty and simplicity of the old-world Amish lifestyle.

The Amish are a North American Protestant group of Mennonite origin. The Amish have maintained a distinctive and conservative agricultural way of life despite the influences of modern industrial society. The most conservative Amish are known as Old Order Amish. They dress in a severely plain style, using hooks and eyes instead of buttons. They ride in horse-drawn traps instead of cars, and the adult males are bearded. Other Amish groups are milder in discipline and less set apart from the world.

All share the practice of believer's, or adult, baptism and often refuse to take part in civil affairs, such as voting or serving in the armed forces. I will chronologically go through the events of the film, explaining what I believe to be the methods that the director has used to convey the extreme clash in cultures. The music at the opening of the film is harmonious, melodic, and slow reflecting the Amish way of life. Scenes of cornfields are very tranquil; corn is thought of as peaceful, an important symbol as it used in Amish culture.

Credits are in black and white, giving an old feel, similar to the Amish. There is no noise, which is extremely dissimilar to American culture. The time and date is shown necessarily as the Amish give no indication of what time it could possibly be due to the fact that their appearance has not changed for decades. The language being spoken is German. This is an ancient language; therefore it seems fitting for the Amish to use it. It is a pleasant event as they are religious, believing that the deceased will have gone to a better place.

The director shows this by their united front and ability to laugh and joke around despite the occasion. Daniel Hoffmeister is introduced, it is made immediately clear that he is a pleasant, prominent figure in their society, and perhaps not so clearly that he may have feelings for Rachel. The scene changes to one consisting of an American road, on which are two vehicles that are extremely effective in showing the differentiation of cultures and the speed at which they modernise. The tiny, insignificant horse and cart is holding up the enormous, boisterous juggernaut that outdates it completely.

Much like they way that American culture completely outdates Amish. Rachel and Samuel are visiting Rachel's sister in Baltimore. Daniel and Eli have taken them to the station. It is only now that when the Amish's dress is shown in contrast to the normal everyday people of American culture, that it seems out of place and odd. Daniel is kind and friendly towards Samuel, the director's way of making Daniel seem pleasant and also to demonstrate that the Amish are extremely polite and courteous towards each other.

You be careful among the English'; this is representing the cultural divide and the Amish dismissal of anyone outside their culture as 'English' irrespective of their true nationality. As Rachel and Sam slowly pull away from the platform, Daniel can be seen showing off, performing low-key stunts to them that are much admired up until the point that the huge, modern train easily outpaces him, just as American culture outpaces Amish. Rachel and Samuel arrive at Philadelphia station to change trains.

Rudeness from the ticket officer is bewildering and very much insulting to Rachel as it is something that the Amish are not familiar with, due to their polite ways. Despite being interpreted in this way by Rachel, this is necessary due to the busyness and rapidity of American culture that cannot participate in such notions as politeness. All of this is very contradictory to Amish culture. Samuel is unfamiliar with and curious of the water fountain, as it is something that would never be found in Amish culture. This shows the Amish ignorance towards modern ideas and contraptions.

Samuel then goes on to witness a statue prominently placed in the centre of the station. He looks on in utter bemusement because statues are in contradiction to the protestant faith. Samuel is told to be careful as he goes to the toilet, as Rachel is wary of modern American citizens and their corruption, indicating the clash. Utter silence and harsh lighting are used to create suspense and intensify the scene. While Samuel is in the cubicle, noises of the murder starting to take place arouse his suspicion and he peeps his head round the door.

Fast and furious music starts, reflecting both the murder, and American culture that are both intertwined in this scene. The murder takes place in one of the bloodiest ways, by severing the jugular vein in the policeman's neck. This is done to create effect, in both the sense of worsening the murder itself; and also to increase the sheer shock and horror of what this poor, Amish boy is witnessing. One of the murderers, Mcfee, washes his hands of the blood after the murder has taken place instead of fleeing with his compatriot.

This represents the typical American attitude of keeping calm, cool and collected despite the seriousness of the situation. This contrasts to the Amish. The victim has now been discovered and Philadelphia cops are swarming around the station. Samuel and Rachel are looking perplexed; as this is probably the first time they have had any involvement in something as grim and severe as this encounter, due to the nature of their culture. John Book is introduced as the officer who is taking on this case. He is a stereotypical American police officer; big and strong, physically intact and good-looking - all-important due to his role in the film.

He is patronising towards the Amish, another typical American approach; anything that is different or you don't know about must be stupid. When talking to Samuel, he uses the abbreviation 'Sam'; an extremely common American thing to do, but something that the Amish would never do. Upon being asked to describe the killer that he saw, Samuel can only describe that he was a coloured man by pointing at Book's partner who is also black and saying 'like him'. This is because Samuel will not have seen black men

before, as there is no other race than Caucasian Germans in the Amish community.

Samuel is impressed by modern American dialect; he repeats it with enthusiasm. This is the first sign of Samuel accepting American culture, as he does throughout the film. Samuel and Rachel are taken through the suburbs of late-night Philadelphia in the back of a police car. Typical city sounds; cars beeping, people shouting, music and bright lights are used to give a good depiction of mainstream America, and to give contrast with the lack of these things in Amish culture, seen earlier on in the film. Rachel is dismissive and angry about what she and her son are being put through.

Because of her lack of encounters with anything similar to this, and her pride to be completely separate from American culture in every way possible, she cannot comprehend why they are being forced to co-operate. The contrast of this is that in Amish culture, people usually willingly co-operate and are not forced. They are taken to a nightclub; stereotypical American scene. John and his partner, Carter, use excessive force to remove a possible suspect from the nightclub and then to shove his face up against the window awaiting confirmation from Samuel. Samuel is terrified, but nevertheless shakes his head blankly.

Rachel is extremely shocked by this, as any Amish would be because of their politeness and courteousness, and expresses her wish to be no further part in this investigation. Book informs her that she does not have a choice in the matter. This is something that Americans like doing; putting people in their place. Samuel asks John his name, and Rachel stubbornly replies that they

need not know anything about him. Book asserts himself, telling them his name. Book rudely barges into his sister's house, informing and not asking, that she will have to board Samuel and Rachel.

He then goes on to raid her fridge. All of these things would be conceived as unthinkable rude to the Amish. John's sister is Rachel's parallel in the film; they are both in the same situation (single with children) but their outtakes on life are very different. John's sister is independent, strong, and has boyfriends over to stay while her children are upstairs sleeping. Rachel is extremely reserved (as are all Amish), and her religion restricts her from having any sort of boyfriend, or sexual relations until she re-marries.

Later on, it is seen that the pillow that Samuel is using on his bed has a Garfield motif. This is a small reminder of the luxuries that the Amish are forbidden to enjoy, and that the Americans are all too used to, and take for granted. Rachel shows previously unseen knowledge of the American justice system, showing to Book that she is perhaps not as unintelligent as he had forethought. John chooses to buy typical American junk food from a fast food cafe??. This type of food would be completely unfounded in Amish culture.

Just as John bites into his hot dog, he notices that Samuel and Rachel are mid-prayer. This is something that John is completely unfamiliar with, and consequently becomes embarrassed and unsure of what to do. Rachel begins heckling John over what she was told by his sister about his insecurities and what he says when he is drunk. This is amusing to Rachel as the Amish are unfamiliar with American arrogance. Samuel burps - this

would be frowned upon in American culture, but is encouraged in Amish culture as it shows good health and heartiness. The lighting is bright, harsh.

People are interested in Samuel, ruffling his hair, offering him food. This is because of his separate appearance to everyone else. Americans stereotypically have a fascination with the unknown, which directly contrasts to the Amish's attitude of dismissing what are unknown/new or having long and extensive discussions before choosing to accept them. A dodgy-looking suspect signals for Samuel to approach him. Samuel complies, as he is naive, lacking the common sense that all of the people around him (Americans) have assumed during their lifetime.

The man goes on to rattle his handcuffs against the chair that he is sitting on, intending to intimidate and scare Samuel. After being reprimanded the man ceases, and Samuel advances to a nearby glass cabinet containing various police memorabilia. Samuel recognises the man on a newspaper cutting as the murderer at the train station toilets. He turns around to look at John and begins pointing at the picture, ignorant to the seriousness of the implication that he is making. Slow, evolving music begins. Everything begins working in slow motion. John walks over and regards the newspaper cutting.

His amazed face shows that he now comprehends everything that has happened, and why it has happened. John nods, Samuel smiles - silently showing understanding and appreciation between the two of them. Fast, thrilling music starts after John is shot. The whole theme of what is going is treachery, in its lowest and worst form. This is something that takes place

every single day in American culture, but would be almost completely unfounded in Amish culture. John drives Samuel and Rachel back to Pennsylvania due to the fact that if John's police peers find Samuel, he will almost certainly be killed.

John's car drives on to the scene of the Amish community - it looks very much out of place among its ancient surroundings (horses and carts, old mode of dress). After dropping off Samuel and Rachel, John drives in to a birdhouse, demolishing it. Rachel, Samuel, and Eli approach his car amid much confusion. Rachel peers in through the window, to discover the wounds that John acquired from Mcfee. She is shocked to find that John still insisted on driving in this condition - American stubbornness. The Amish take him in and care for him, representing their hospitality and kindness.

While Rachel is treating John's wounds, he blasphemes. This is accepted due to his condition and persona, but would be otherwise completely in tolerated in the Amish community. Schaeffa is unable to locate the certain farm at which John is staying because the only name that he can link to an address is 'Lapp' which is shared by an extremely large proportion of the Amish. The contrast is that the law methods used in American culture cannot be applied to Amish culture. The 'elders' go to inspect John; much like the way contraptions must be inspected before being taken in.

John notices Samuel handling his gun while loaded, in his bedroom. Guns, and their purpose, are completely despised and discarded by the Amish. John then goes on to remove the bullets and informs Samuel that it is perfectly safe to hold when unloaded. At this point, Rachel walks in and does not at

first see what they are doing. John knows that he would get in trouble for letting Samuel do this, and therefore removes the gun from Samuel. Rachel sees this happening and tells Samuel to go. John receives a warning from Rachel to abide by the rules of her house when he is living in it.

This is a sharp reminder of the strict ways of the Amish that contrast to John's more lenient attitude. Upon being asked by Eli, 'would you kill a man?', Samuel replies 'I would only kill a bad man'. This is showing Samuel gradually beginning to accept the ways of Book and American culture. John accepts Rachel's husband's clothes. This symbolises Rachel's fantasy for John to take the place of her husband, or to at least stake a place in the Amish community. It also represents John learning to accept the Amish, despite their extreme differences. John looks silly in them as they do not fit, do not match.

This is similar to the way that American and Amish cultures do not match. Rachel retrieves John's bullets from a flour tin with some remains of flour with them. Rachel is naive to the fact that this could defect the gun because of the Amish's unfamiliarity with these sorts of paraphernalia. Whilst Book is attempting to get his car working, Eli asks if he is able to do some work, on the assumption that he should be because he is well enough to do things that he wants to do. This is a slight implication that Americans are lazy and not willing to do things for anyone but themselves.

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