

Of Human Hearts

US : 1938 : dir. Clarence Brown : M.G.M. : 100 min
 prod: : scr: Bradbury Foote : dir.ph.: Clyde de Vinna
Gene Reynolds
 Walter Huston; James Stewart; Beulah Bondi; Guy Kibbee; Charles Coburn; John Carradine;
 Ann Rutherford; Gene Lockhart; Ted Healey; Leatrice Joy Gilbert; Charley Grapewin

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ € Z ♀	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Of Hot Behinds - Walter Huston and Gene Reynolds

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

"Odd blend of potent 19th-century Americana and mile-high corn, in a tale of dedicated preacher Huston who never established a rapport with his son. When Abraham Lincoln (Carradine) lectures Stewart about neglecting his mother, it gets to be a bit much. **1½"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A 19th-century idyll of middle America and especially of a preacher and his wayward son. Curious All-American moral fable, splendidly made and acted. The title was chosen via a radio contest, the winner being a high school student. Scr. Bradbury Foote, from the novel "Benefits Forgot" by Honoré Morrow. Dir.ph: Clyde de Vinna; music: Herbert Stothart. Academy Award nomination: Beulah Bondi. *"

"Long on narrative and short on romance... the box office reaction is likely to dampen the enthusiasm of those who believe the film possesses any wide public appeal." - **Variety**



After the boyhood prologue Gene Reynolds metamorphoses into a young James Stewart, but the film's better scenes are all in the first half hour.

Source: The MGM Story

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"A beautifully made example of the genre Americana, set in an Ohio township at the time of the Civil War and encompassing poverty, death and, towards the end as the tale runs downhill, filial ingratitude. The son is James Stewart and his parents are Walter Huston and Beulah Bondi; you will also see Charles Coburn, Ann Rutherford, Gene Lockhart and John Carradine (as Lincoln). **"

Movies on TV (1987) review:

"You'll like this sensitive, dramatic tale of a backwoods family in Ohio. The story tells of a young physician who is sent for by Lincoln during the Civil War because he has neglected writing to his mother. The picture tells the story of this boy and his family. ***½"

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"The direction, by Clarence Brown, of this poignant melodrama, set in the Ohio Valleys before and during the American Civil War, is sensitive and pictorially very imaginative, and he extracts superb performances from Walter Huston, James Stewart and Beulah Bondi. The plot, about the resentful son of a martinet clergyman who becomes determined to make a go of his life as a doctor despite abject poverty, is often syrupy but Brown overcomes the storyline faults with a lively eye and sprightly visuals. ***"

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Frontier life in a village on the banks of the Ohio river in the days preceding the Civil War

The son, however, rebels against the petty tyranny and selfishness of the neighbours.

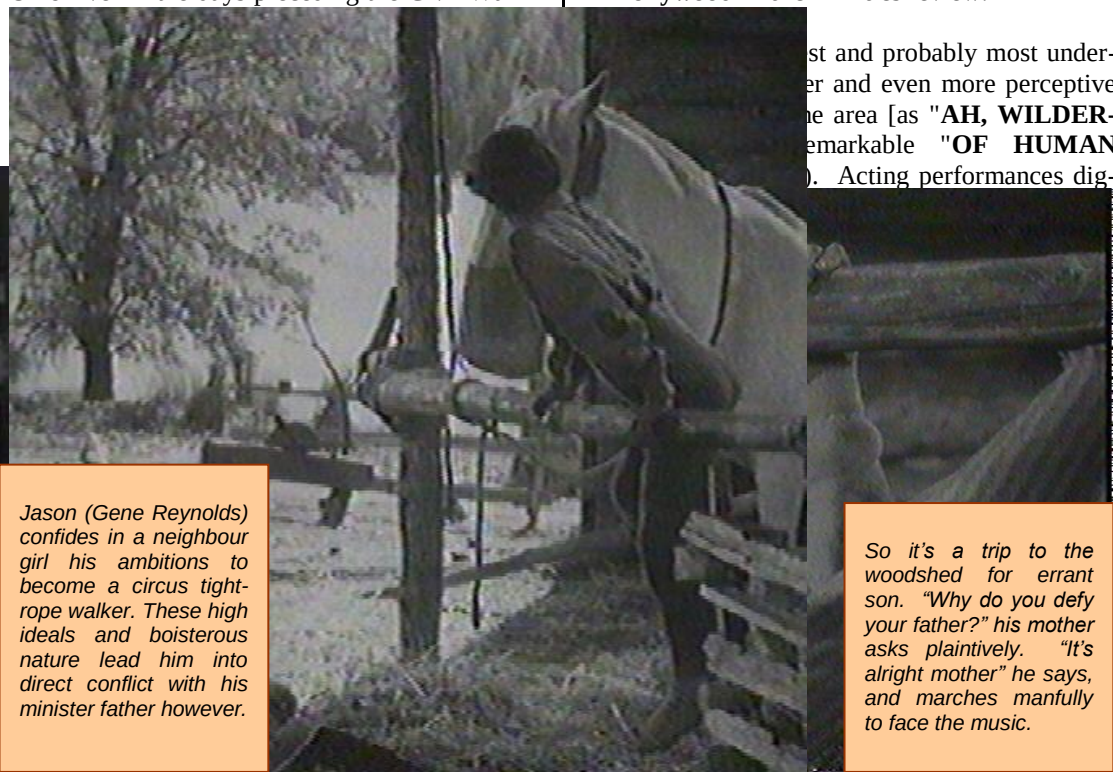
The latter part of the film relates the boy's brilliant success as a surgeon in the Union army, and his neglect for his mother, now widowed. Walter Huston is the zealous circuit riding preacher, a man of uncompromising principle. Beulah Bondi is the wife and mother and she shades the transitions of age with convincing acting. Gene Reynolds first appears as the son, a role played by James Stewart in the later scenes. Chief cause for disappointment with the film is its slow pace, and the defeatist mood of the story."

The M.G.M. Story comment:

"In **"OF HUMAN HEARTS"** Clarence Brown filmed a study of rural life worthy of standing beside Vidor's **"STRANGER'S RETURN"** and his own **"AH, WILDERNESS!"**. Walter Huston and James Stewart were superb as religion-bound father and rebellious son, with Beulah Bondi matching them as the mother making sacrifices to help her son break away to become a surgeon. A fourth outstanding performance came from Gene Reynolds, playing Stewart as a boy.

Others in the John Considine Jr production were Charles Coburn (screen debut at 61), Guy Kibbee, John Carradine (as Abraham Lincoln), Ted Healy, Gene Lockhart, Leatrice Joy Gilbert (John's daughter), Ann Rutherford and Charley Grapewin. Bradbury Foote scripted from Honoré Morrow's novel "Benefits Forgot". Too many fans forgot to come."

Hollywood in the Thirties review:



Jason (Gene Reynolds) confides in a neighbour girl his ambitions to become a circus tight-rope walker. These high ideals and boisterous nature lead him into direct conflict with his minister father however.

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emarkable **"OF HUMAN**
). Acting performances dig-

So it's a trip to the woodshed for errant son. "Why do you defy your father?" his mother asks plaintively. "It's alright mother" he says, and marches manfully to face the music.

In 1942's **"YANKEE DOODLE DANDY"** it was Douglas Croft's turn to sweep across Walter Huston's knees for a spanking – that scene was played for broad comedy, but even here Huston is not cast as the cruel, bullying father. He's simply puzzled and exasperated by his son's apparent wilfulness, but still hasn't the heart to use the razor strop for the purpose.



work; these qualities, combined with Bradbury Foote's script, make this one of the Thirties' great films.

"OF HUMAN HEARTS" perfectly re-creates the period. Huston's parson is a striking combination of peasant strength and religious fanaticism. The family's arrival in the village,



the meanness of the townsfolk who, slyly pleading hard times, cheat them, are brilliantly realised, as is their surprise at Huston's unwillingness to endure their parsimony, the sarcasm of the blessing which he offers up, thanking the lord that he has only a small family, going over their heads.

The tension between ambitious son and stern father is built up skilfully, culminating in a darkly violent scene where Stewart defies Huston during a trip into the mountains, punches him, then stops, terrified at what he has done, standing dumbly as Huston beats him mercilessly to the ground. A tethered horse rears frantically behind them, recalling, perhaps symbolically, an earlier scene in which Huston, the personification of strength and prophet-like majesty, catches and takes for his own a white horse that has run wild through the village¹.

The final scenes of "**OF HUMAN HEARTS**" dissolve, as do those of "**A FREE SOUL**", into sentiment, but the Civil War background, and Stewart's believable portrayal of a talented but thoughtless young doctor do much to make this Brown's most consistent film."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Civil War drama about the unnecessary suffering a preacher inflicts on his family by forcing them to live frugally to set an example. Walter Huston, James Stewart, Beulah Bondi
*** "

What's On TV review:

"A folksy slice of Americana set mainly in the years before the Civil War. In the wilds of Ohio, Walter Huston is the stern, religious dad who turns his son James Stewart against him. In turn, Stewart takes for granted the sacrifices of his mother (Beulah Bondi) which enable

him to become a doctor. In the film's most famous sequence, John Carradine (as President Lincoln) tells Stewart to be nicer to his ma.
** "

"Drama set in 19th-century America about a preacher and his wayward son."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Reynolds:

"Eugene Reynolds Blumenthal - for it is he - was a wildly romantic-looking boy, with the features of a matinee idol and expressive, intelligent brown eyes. If a youngster with artistic or idealistic leanings was called for in a movie of the late Thirties, Reynolds was your choice. He was a dead ringer for Tyrone Power (and actually grew into him in the 1938 film "**IN OLD CHICAGO**") but without old Ty's air of honest bafflement.

He began at two with some modelling, took the stage (in Detroit) at six, then began to do radio work. The road led inexorably to screen tests in Hollywood, and a debut in "**TOO MANY PARENTS**". M.G.M had him under contract from 1938. Gene had some good parts in 1940, in "**GALLANT SONS**", "**THE MORTAL STORM**" and "**SANTA FE TRAIL**", and in the 1942 serial "**JUNIOR G-MEN OF THE AIR**". Then, when war embroiled the USA, he served with the Navy.

Once it was over he resumed his acting career, but without any conviction that it was what he wanted to do. He had parts in "**THE BIG CAT**" (49), "**THE COUNTRY GIRL**" (54) and "**DIANE**" (55). After working in television he got the chance to write and direct, and it was this that eventually led to his most priceless contribution to the popular culture of our times. He became producer (and sometimes writer or director) of TV's "**M.A.S.H**" series, with its magnificent complexity of response and richness of repartee."

¹ No, it recalls, far more obviously, the earlier scene where Huston is spanking Reynolds in the barn, and the camera pans away to the same tethered horse, rearing frantically at the echoing sound of the smacks.



Of course, Gene was getting a bit tenderised by take twenty-six, but it was all worth it in the end...

Source for sequence of frame grabs on preceding pages: The Movie and TV Spanking Page

Only one of the reviews above gives Gene Reynolds credit for an “outstanding performance”, while others blithely ignore him altogether (he’s only the central figure of the first part of the film). James Stewart’s performance in the second half isn’t one jot better than Reynolds’, it’s merely that child players are waived aside as an irrelevance in the “serious acting” stakes.

Reynolds was actually 15, although he passes quite acceptably for 12. Only the first twenty or thirty minutes of the film are of interest from the archive's point of view, and in any case the early sections are by general assent the strongest. When Walter Huston exits the screen the film loses most of its dramatic impetus.

Preacher’s son Jason is a dreamer, by contrast with his earnest, pragmatic father, and is undecided whether he wants to be a doctor, an acrobat or a tightrope walker (astronauts came later). He befriends a village girl, Annie (actress unknown), but flatly rejects all overtures on her part to become sweethearts (how times have changed!). Jason’s temperament is misinterpreted by his father as wilfulness: “Why did the lord give us such a rebellious son?” he protests in exasperation, sending the boy once again for the razor-stop. “Perhaps to make you understand children better, dear” his wife rejoins sweetly.

Matters have come to a head over some copies of “Harpers” magazine Jason has stashed away, against his father’s strictures that such fripperies have no place in their home. At this point the boy’s rebellion is not a conscious one, but his stern punishment (in both senses) fosters a far-reaching resentment at his father’s intractability. Mother, as always in such cases, is presented as the anguished peacemaker torn between husband and son.

The family tensions which underpin the early section, and Huston’s stoicism in the face of his congregation’s parsimony, are far more satisfying than the Civil War episodes which follow, and the script descends into the cornfields when Abraham Lincoln summons army doctor Stewart from the field to lecture him (and us) about the priceless treasure of motherhood.

Similar in some respects was M.G.M.’s **"STARS IN MY CROWN"** (50) in which Dean Stockwell played the son of itinerant preacher Joel McCrea in post-Civil War Tennessee. Other family-conflict stories on the eve of Civil War would include **"FRIENDLY PERSUASION"** (56), where Gary Cooper was the father and Anthony Perkins the (teenaged) son who runs athwart him.

Gene Reynolds made 14 films under contract to M.G.M. between 1938 and '40, including a small part in **"BOYS' TOWN"** (following an equally small one in **"CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS"** the year before, as one of the pupils in the school printshop). His other films included **"LIBELED LADY"** (36), **"TOO MANY PARENTS"** (36) **"THE CROWD ROARS"** (38) and **"THEY SHALL HAVE MUSIC"** (39, finally in a more central role).

"OF HUMAN HEARTS" was shot the same year as Selznick’s **"THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER"**, a part Reynolds would doubtless have given his eye-teeth for, and it’s amusing to speculate how he would have fared in it. Better-looking than Tommy Kelly, but less of a ragamuffin, he was perhaps, as Holmstrom suggests, too much the fledgling matinee idol to play Twain’s quintessential boy (as was Elijah Wood in 1993’s **"THE ADVENTURES OF HUCK FINN"**).

See subject index under **BOY MEETS GIRL, CHILDHOOD PROLOGUES, CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, RELIGION** and **WESTERNS**.